

FAMILY LIFE

Way to Holiness



Dr George Kaitholil, SSP



Fr. Ajay Sabharwal

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Way to Holiness

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FAMILY LIFE **Way to Holiness**

Dr George Kaitholil, SSP



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Foreword

Dr George Kaitholil, a noted young theologian hailing from Kerala, is herein presenting the official Christian view regarding the institution of marriage. More than a social institution, it is one of the seven sacraments, an invitation to sanctity, symbolising the mystic union of Christ with the Church. There is a remarkable correspondence between the Holy Trinity and the triad comprising the father, mother and child. A family bonded in love is a mirror of the Holy Trinity on earth.

Conjugal love is the driving force behind the couple's pursuit of noble ends. Married life offers many a great challenge not encountered in the celibate's vocation. The Christian family is the nursery of Christian faith, hope and charity. A family having a strong foundation in love is very close to God, while one that feeds on hate is in the devil's lap.

Marital communion involves the total surrender of the husband and wife to each other. Marriage is a sacred covenant requiring mutual acceptance. The ideal couple is one in body and soul. The newly wed undergo a rapid process of transformation and maturing, thanks to divine grace, and begin to behave as a team out to play the game of life. The Christian sees the fruits of married life as the gift of God.

Quoting extensively from the Bible and various other sources, Dr Kaitholil succeeds in putting forth the theological position vis-à-vis marriage in an easily understood and admirable form. In arriving at his sober conclusions he draws upon the experiences of several people with whom he has had personal contact. I appreciate the laborious and pain-

staking effort put into this. The idea of marital spirituality is the core theme of the work. Couples both married and about-to-be married, whether old or young, will herein find a rich mine of information, valuable in their progress towards spiritual fulfilment.

This can be used as an authentic source book in preparatory courses offered to prospective couples. I am confident, this work will be widely appreciated.

Dr Kaitholil, well known for his mastery of a lucid and beautiful style, has once again accomplished a marvellous job in writing this wonderful book.

Kochi 682 022
August 15, 2000

Dr K. Babu Joseph
Vice Chancellor
Cochin University
of Science and Technology



Introduction

The importance of the family is obvious. Yet the family has been somewhat neglected in pastoral care and Christian literature till very recent times. Marriage has often been understood as a necessity of the human condition and not so much as a vocation to sanctity. There is need to place in relief the fact that the family is the ambient where Christian life is lived and basic Christian virtues are cultivated.

It is in the context of marriage that the spouses practise love of God, of each other and of neighbour and thus grow in sanctity. The family is the most important school where children begin to listen to the Word of God and learn the rudiments of faith, hope and charity. It is in the family that the formation of Christian conscience begins. There is no substitute for the training and formation they receive at home.

Various social and cultural influences and changes have put the modern household in a state of crisis. The sanctity attached to the family is being corroded. As a result the family bond is weakened and traditional values and ideals that used to be cherished in the families are being discarded. Many homes are no more centres of basic training in goodness, and the praying voice is no more heard there. Faith in God and the desire to grow in holiness are not important to many individuals and families. It is in this context that I have tried to put down some sobering and elevating thoughts about the family.

In the following pages I have made an attempt to show clearly that marriage is really a call to sanctity and is truly a path to perfection. Marriage is the vocation of the vast majority of people. It is the fertile ground where they all work, love, serve, struggle and grow in holiness.

This is in no way an exhaustive treatise on marriage, dealing with all its aspects and implications like social, psychological, financial, relational, technical, etc. However, these too have been included in various measures as subjects closely linked to family life. The focus here is on married life as a call to sanctity. Marriage is the greatest, most extensive field of Christian living. I have therefore tried to deal with the main themes that come within marital spirituality.

In this endeavour, I have sought the help of several married couples. Many of them have talked to me or written to me giving valuable suggestions, points to deal with and even short reflections. Many were enthusiastic about this project. Good friends gave me encouragement and support. I am sincerely thankful to all who kindly helped me in whatever way. I have also made considerable use of what I have learnt from numerous books in different languages, articles in several magazines and reports in some newspapers. A select bibliography is included at the end of the book.

A special word of thanks to Dr Babu Joseph, honourable Vice Chancellor of Cochin University, who was kind enough to take pains over going through the manuscript and writing a worthy Foreword to the book.

I fervently hope this humble labour of mine will help my fellow pilgrims to understand marriage correctly and to accept and live it fully and joyfully as a genuine call to holiness.

May the Lord of Love who deigned to be born in a human family to teach us the way to sanctity bless all married couples of the past, of the present and of the future and enable all my readers to live up to their vocation.

— *George Kaitholil*





The Christian Family



Sanctity is not the monopoly of monks or nuns or celibates. Growth in holiness is an equal possibility and responsibility of married couples as well. As Pope John Paul II says in *Familiaris Consortio*, "Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to sanctity. For them this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life. This gives rise to the grace and requirement of an authentic and profound conjugal and family spirituality that draws its inspiration from the themes of creation, covenant, cross, resurrection and sign" (No 56).

Some years ago, Tom and Lyn Scheuring wrote complaining that they could not recall anyone who became a canonised saint out of a positive experience of marriage in itself. They note that in most cases each spouse wound up going into a monastery or convent. Tom says, "That's kind of dis-

couraging – as if Lyn and I can't be cause and support of each other's growth toward God. Probably in the long history of the Church there are some, but they are not very well known. Mary and Joseph would be a noted exception, or Joachim and Ann... But we, as a married couple, do need people we can look to for inspiration in our vocation. Couples who, because of their deep love for God and each other, can be an example to us."

There is a welcome change now, as John Paul II wants to canonise married couples, paying careful attention to the holiness of those who in our own time lived fully by the truth of Christ. "In particular," he says, "there is a need to foster the recognition of the heroic virtues of men and women who have lived their Christian vocation in marriage. Precisely because we are convinced of the abundant fruits of holiness in the married state, we need to find the most appropriate means for discerning them and proposing them to the whole Church as a model and encouragement for other Christian spouses" (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, No 37).

Family Spirituality

Marriage being a sacrament, family life is a vocation to holiness. The family is the principal locus where one lives, experiences and expresses love for God and love for one another. It is there that one learns the rudiments of faith. It is there one picks up the basic and essential virtues like faithfulness, truthfulness, honesty, tolerance, patience, kindness, cooperation, service, understanding, etc.

How to live as Christians the reality of marriage and family? For Christians, every state of life is a following of Christ and imitation of Christ. In the context of the universal call to sanctity, family spirituality has a special role to play.

Family spirituality is a way to sanctity along which the man and the woman, united in the sacrament of matrimony, grow together in faith, hope and charity. Thus they bear witness to the love of Christ in front of others, of the children and of the world. This process is characteristic of marriage and family life.

In the Christian living of matrimony taken globally, there are two distinct and interrelated areas. One is conjugal spirituality, to be lived as a couple, that is realised in the love-relationship between the man and the woman in marriage. It is marked by this affective dimension, the common life and the mutual integration on the sexual plane. Above all it is marked by the sacrament. The other area is family spirituality which, through maternity and paternity, extends to the relationship between parents and children. An affective dimension that follows the rhythms of various age-levels and stages of development also defines this.

When the spouses express with faith their consent, they do so before God and the Church and the secular society. It is a moment of grace and commitment, a solemn beginning. As the meaning of this union unfolds itself through their experience, the spouses "attain to it with growing perfection day by day" (G.S. 48). When in a marriage the commitment to faith and trust in God are totally lacking, it becomes an empty ritual devoid of any substance or value.

The life of a human person, alone or with other persons, has a salvific value to the extent that it ensures authentic love and the freedom to grow in that love. Authentic mutual love promotes freedom and creativity to the highest degree. Persons who love in this manner help each other to bloom, to be their best, to grow in excellence. In marriage divine love becomes visible in the love of the partners for each other and in the mutual love of parents and children. The sacrament of

matrimony is basically all about the love of the couple making the love of God more visible and understandable to the world.

Marriage is a partnership in which reciprocal love, dialogue, mutual respect, equality in dignity, shared ideals, common search for what is good, common decision and joint endeavour have an indispensable role to play. When these prevail, marriage leads to growth in maturity. According to Hindu scriptures, the ideal companionship between husband and wife is a partnership. As Rigveda describes, a married woman is a comrade of the husband, both having similar interests and complementing each other. Dr S. Radhakrishnan holds that marriage "is essentially a fellowship between a man and a woman who seek to live creatively in partnership." Authentic love is something alive in which neither of the partners will seek to dominate the other; they will instead "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21). They will love each other "as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

The Family Is the Hinge

The family can be rightly considered the true and irreplaceable hinge of a very important basic solidarity. It is a solidarity on the natural plane, i.e., transmission of life, living together, community of love, education, etc. It is also and equally a solidarity on the supernatural plane because it is founded on the sacrament of matrimony and ordained to promote growth in faith and love. Every human being has a vocation to grow in perfection and be holy. The way to grow in perfection is the fulfilment of the duties and obligations of life.

Speaking of matrimony which is the foundation of the Christian family, St Paul calls it "a great mystery" precisely in reference to Christ and the Church community. The sacrament of matrimony contains in itself a powerful dynamism of

renewal and growth. Here we understand by growth not only the increase of numbers by procreation, but also the real assimilation of the mystery of Christ and bearing witness to it in the Church community.

The family is the fundamental unit of society, and plays a central role in the humanisation of the individual and society, and thus in weaving our social fabric. Already at the natural plane the spouses are the dynamic centre around which gravitates every layer of society like children, the aged, education, school, culture, work and care. The same is true of the Church community. The family represents the hinge on which revolves the various stages of Christian life such as the first education of children, the Christian growth of the youth, care of the sick and the aged, participation in and promotion of community life.

However, these are purely functional considerations. There are other motives, deeper in comparison with them. As the Genesis story shows, matrimony and family stand at the very heart of the plan of creation. Above all they occupy a central place in the plan of redemption, being an imitation of the mystery itself of the Church. The family is, by itself, the living image of the Church, that is, of the Church community. More precisely, it represents and symbolises the community of life between God and His people. It becomes an earthly image of the Trinitarian love.¹

Need of a Paradigm Shift

In our society prevails the paradigm that takes into account above all, and perhaps solely, the individual. Yet, for the well-being of the individual, there should be more of the family in our families. That is to say, there should be more togetherness, greater concern for one another, better family spirit and deeper affection and solicitude for one another in our families.

The reality of the family is something that interests not only the individual. It is a mystery in the Church and of the Church. It is a sign given to human beings to manifest to them and to share with them something of the love of God. It is this love that builds up the family and of which the family in turn should give witness to others.

These short reflections already indicate how necessary it is to update the pastoral care of families, not only with the times but also with the mystery of the Church. The family has to become the unifying centre of the Church's pastoral action. As Pope John Paul II points out, the pastoral care of the regularly established family signifies the commitment of all the members of the local Church community to helping the couple to discover and live their new vocation and mission. This is true, he says, especially for young families which are more vulnerable to possible difficulties such as those created by adaptation to life together or by the birth of children. Therefore he counsels young married couples to make good use of the discreet, tactful and generous help offered by other couples that already have more experience in married and family life (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 69).

A good Christian couple complains, "There is something missing in the writings of the Church as far as making married spirituality something really concrete, practical and down to earth." In the past, attention was given above all to the formation of the individuals, trusting that once they receive a Christian formation, they would be able to live in the Christian way also in their families. Time has come to pass from this approach to addressing the family as a community. Marriage and family merit greater attention and care. The creation of a Christian family is the concern of the whole Church community and brings into action the entire mission of the Church: to teach, to sanctify and to guide.

A New Catechesis

In order that the family discovers and realises all its human and supernatural riches, it is necessary to begin a new catechesis on marriage and family. It has to be a serene catechesis based on the Gospel. It should overcome the taboo of sex and respect all the complex riches of the human reality. It should also transmit the fullness of the Christian mystery. It has, therefore, to be a catechesis which shows that genuine love is something sacred, holy, that love is the way to sanctity, and therefore love is the authentic mission of the Church. In order to be convincing and credible, this catechesis has to be supported by the testimony of those who live family life. An effort has been made to include such testimonies in this book.

At the sacramental level too, more will have to be done. We cannot be satisfied with the office formalities, legal procedures and the few meetings of preparation at the time of marriage. In fact the preparation of a Christian family should begin not a few days before the wedding, but already with the baptismal catechesis and Christian initiation. Above all, it should begin with the vitality of the ecclesial groups at the grassroots level, i.e., of Basic Christian Communities.

In the field of faith-formation and evangelisation, a Christian family can carry out a fruitful service to the Word of God. The witness of a life of faith lived in the family is the first and the most effective evangelisation for the children. As Vatican II affirms, in the married and family life there exists an excellent school of apostolate where Christianity permeates a whole way of life and transforms it ever increasingly. There the spouses find their proper vocation in being witnesses of the faith and of the love of Christ to each other and to the children (cf. L.G. 35).

Family life thus becomes a liturgy, that is, an exercise of spiritual worship by which God is glorified and people are

saved. The home becomes a domestic Church, and the ministers of this special form of liturgy are the spouses who love the Lord and love each other in the Lord (cf. L.G. 34).

As the Christian life of the family develops, conjugal and family spirituality also progresses. The number of pious practices undertaken or the variety of devotions does not measure such a spirituality. It is not something added to the reality of conjugal life from outside. The spirituality of the Christian spouses is the very reality of conjugal and family life, understood and lived in the light of faith. This spirituality, therefore, is a deliberate and purposeful consciousness of the natural and supernatural values inherent in love and the consequent commitment to respect them and to promote them in one's own life.

An evident consequence of this life of love is openness to others and the apostolic commitment of the spouses in the wider context of the Church community. Conversations, work, activities in the various professions continuously offer opportunities to practise love and to bear witness to the Gospel.

What is necessary is to have a heart oriented from within to feel the problems and needs of one's neighbour. Besides, it is of fundamental importance for the spouses to feel these problems together, in tune with each other, to help each other to experience togetherness, and to work together in search of possible solutions. We shall be able to promote the welfare of human society only if we take into account the family as a whole and recognise that the family is an irreplaceable value and an essential source for society.

Points to Ponder

1. Does your family need conversion in any area — some unhealthy habit, some dishonest business, some unholy relationship?

2. a) If you are not married, what qualities and characteristics would you like your future spouse to possess?
- b) If you are married, what can you do together with your spouse to improve the quality of your life and relationship?



The Most Beautiful Thing



We begin with a story in point. There was a king very much interested in decorating his palace with beautiful paintings. One day he called his minister and told him, "Get the best artist and ask him to paint for me the most beautiful thing in the world." So the minister, after many days of search, found the best painter in the country and appointed him to paint a picture of the most beautiful thing in the world. That was the order of the king.

The painter was at a loss as to what picture he should paint. While going in search of the most beautiful thing, he met a holy man, a sanyasi, and asked him, "What is the most beautiful thing in the world?" The holy man replied, "Prayer with devotion." Certainly in his understanding that was the most beautiful thing. But the artist did not know how to give shape and colour to prayer. That was a big problem for him. Somehow he had to obey the king's order.

So he went along and met a young couple on the way and asked them. "What is the most beautiful thing in the world?" They said in one breath, "Love." They could think of nothing more beautiful than that. The artist thought, that is true. Yet his problem was not solved. How to paint love? Wondering what to do, he moved on.

Further down the road he met an ex-serviceman and asked him, "Tell me, what is the most beautiful thing in the world." The old soldier replied, "Peace. There is nothing more beautiful than peace. If there is peace, there is no war, and there is no trouble and no bloodshed." Very true, thought the artist. But how to paint peace! He was worried. The king's command had to be obeyed.

Tense and anxious, the artist went home and sat quietly in a corner, lost in his problem. His wife noted that he was cheerless and tense. So she asked him, "You seem to be very much worried. Come on, dear! What is the matter?" "The king has commanded that I should paint the most beautiful thing in the world," he said. "Different people name different things as the most beautiful. I am not able to paint any of them because they are so abstract." He told her the story of his meeting with different people. Then he turned to her and asked, "What is the most beautiful thing according to you?" She said, "Faith and faithfulness." Of course, for a good wife there is nothing more beautiful than that. "Quite true," he said, "but how can I paint faith and faithfulness?"

The lady took one step closer to her husband and said, "Come on now. Take heart, and don't worry. It is very simple. All the things they told you are right. You just put all the answers together. You see, don't we pray every day and live a devout life? Don't we enjoy peace in the family? Don't we love one another? And don't we have faith in each other and remain faithful to each other? All these beautiful things are in

the family. You simply paint the family and you have the most beautiful thing in the world."

That solved the problem. It was easy to paint the family, giving it appropriate figure, form, shape and colour. So the artist set to work immediately. When the painting was finished, it was wonderful to see. The artist brought his masterpiece to the king and told him the story behind it. The king was very happy and rewarded the artist with a thousand gold coins.

The Ideal Family

Indeed, a good family where the members pray and worship God, where there is mutual love, where there is peace and where there is faith and fidelity between the husband and the wife, is the most beautiful reality in the world. When the members practise these qualities, their family will definitely present a most wonderful, most beautiful picture. It will be the ideal, the most desirable kind of family.

Pope John Paul II affirms that the family is the first and the most important path, one that is common to all, yet one which is particular (cf. *Letter to Families*, 1994, 2). Every person normally comes into the world within a family. When God, in His love, gave His only Son to the world (cf. Jn 3:16), the Son who is God from God and Light from Light entered into human history through a family. Jesus was thus born in the Holy Family of Nazareth. As the Pope says, "the divine mystery of the Incarnation of the Word has an intimate connection with the human family.")

The family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the family in which God the Son, the eternal Word, was born as man, is certainly an ideal family, the best example of family living, the noblest model for all families. There we see genuine family spirit in

action. There we learn how we can produce an atmosphere of love, peace and joy in our families. From there we take the lessons of mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation and solicitude. A family in which all the members are united together in mutual respect and love is certainly a heavenly experience.

The Holy Family of Nazareth was marked by a constant search for the will of God, and a life-long commitment to fulfil it. With simplicity and humility its members — Jesus, Mary and Joseph — cherished mutual love, oneness and respect for one another. They shared the responsibilities, the joys and the sorrows of family life.

St Paul exhorts us to build up in ourselves the qualities necessary for good Christian living. If the members of a family have these qualities, theirs will be an ideal, wonderful family. In his letter to Colossians, Paul beautifully strings them together. It is worth quoting his text here.

“You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity.

The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make, for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful. Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts. Teach and instruct each other in all wisdom. Sing psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts. Everything you do

or say, then, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through him to God the Father.

Wives, submit to your husbands, for that is what you should do as Christians. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents always, for that is what pleases God. Parents, do not irritate your children, or they will become discouraged" (Col 3:12-21).

We must note here that the submission of the wife is not dependence because to it corresponds the love of the husband. The obedience of the children is not passivity because it is the right response to the encouraging benevolence of the parents.

It has been said quite correctly that the world is the sum total of its individual families. The quality of the world will depend on the quality of its families. It is the good Christian family that builds up sanctity in daily life. The Christian faith is lived in the Christian home wherein each member does his or her duty. The husband has his duty and the wife has hers; the parents have their duty and the children have theirs. When all of them are faithful to their respective duties, they make a wonderful home.

A Shining Example

In the Holy Family we have an excellent example of such a home. It is the model for all families. Pope Leo XIII says, "Fathers of families will find in St Joseph an admirable model of vigilance and paternal solicitude. Mothers have in the Virgin Mary an outstanding example of love, modesty, respect and submission. Children will find in Jesus, subjection to his parents, a divine example of obedience. Those of noble rank

will learn from this family of royal blood moderation in prosperity and dignity in affliction. The rich will learn to appreciate virtue more than wealth. Workers and all those labouring under hardships of poverty will find motive and occasion to rejoice rather than grieve in their lot because of what they have in common with the Holy Family, namely labour and cares."

Mothers have in Mary their model in keeping the love of God alive and active in their homes. As a result of doing this, peace, love of neighbour and harmony in the family will follow. Fathers will find their model in St Joseph, the patient and just man. He worked all day, probably at times without any earthly reward, often struggling to procure the needful for Jesus and Mary. But he willingly submitted to God's plan and devoutly fulfilled the role assigned to him. He was ever the humble, loving, caring and respectful head of the family. He was happy to be associated with the mystery of redemption as the foster father of the Son of God who became man.

Children have their ideal in Jesus. They should love, honour and obey their parents as Jesus loved, honoured and obeyed Joseph and Mary. He was the Son of God, and the Creator and Lord of all things, yet he was subject to Mary and Joseph. As the Gospel says, "Jesus went back with them to Nazareth where he was obedient to them" (Lk 2:51). If Jesus Christ was subject to his inferiors, it should not be difficult for us to be subject to our superiors, persons whom God has placed over us.

How desirable it is to make the holy home of Nazareth the model of our homes and to imitate the Holy Family in our daily lives! It is the exemplar and ideal of obedience to God and mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation among the members. In all their vicissitudes, each member remained faithful to God's plan.

Yet, at the same time I must say that while all else is ideal, the perpetual virginity of Joseph and Mary is not the ideal for married couples. The will of God in their regard was exceptional and unparalleled. God had a very special and clear plan for them. Therefore the total abstinence that they practised cannot be proposed to other couples as ideal, nor can their example be taken as an excuse for couples today to totally exclude children. Sexual union and procreation should be part of the process of sanctification for all married couples. On this point, they need to differ from the Holy Family.

Similarly, one should note that Jesus was the Son of God and the Word become flesh. He was therefore unlike any other child. Some of his behaviour would be totally unacceptable in any other child, like telling Joseph and Mary that he should be busy about his Father's business. Jesus was obedient to them, as the Gospel clearly states. Yet he came to do the Heavenly Father's will which he knew exactly and which was his priority. Children have to understand this correctly and not find in the words and actions of Jesus an excuse for answering back to parents or for running away from home. Jesus never did that.

In an address delivered on 5 January, 1964, Pope Paul VI spoke of the Holy Family as the school of Nazareth where we have to learn many lessons. After pointing out the importance of the lesson of silence he said, "Next, there is a lesson on family life. May Nazareth teach us what family life is, its communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, and its sacred and inviolable character. Let us learn from Nazareth that the formation received at home is gentle and irreplaceable. Let us learn the prime importance of the role of the family in the social order."

Paul VI went on to explain the lesson of work that one learns from the Holy Family of Nazareth. There we learn "the

severe and redeeming law of human work" and recognise the nobility of work. The Pope reaffirmed that work cannot be an end in itself, but that its freedom and its excellence derive, over and above its economic worth, from the value of those for whose sake it is undertaken. He held out to all the workers of the world the Lord Jesus, their great pattern, their Brother who is God.

In such an ideal atmosphere of harmony, love and peace the child Jesus "grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favour with God and men." He was divine and human. The human Jesus developed normally and fully in the healthy climate of the family. He took an active interest in the affairs of the family by helping Joseph in his work as a carpenter and assisting Mary at home. Interacting with customers and neighbours, and wielding chisel, hammer and file, he gained experience of persons and things around him.

They Had Their Troubles

This does not mean that in the life of the Holy Family everything was cosy and rosy. Like any other family, they too had their difficulties, anxieties and troubles. When she received the Annunciation, "Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message." She had extremely serious difficulty about that message. The angel gave the explanation whereupon Mary said her "Yes" to God's will. Through all her confusion and doubt, Mary remained simple, sincere and open to God (cf. Lk 1:26-38).

When Mary was going to have a baby, Joseph was confused and anguished, for they were only engaged and not married. Yet he loved Mary and did not want to disgrace her. Very likely Mary knew the anguish of Joseph, but it was not up to her to give an explanation. It was God's doing, and He gave the explanation. He sent an angel to reas-

sure Joseph and to urge him to accept Mary, at a moment when Joseph was planning to break the engagement quietly (cf. Mt 1:18-21).

Mary and Joseph went through this terrible crisis and came out of it wonderfully because they loved, trusted and respected each other and because they willingly accepted God's plan. The situation was a potential disaster, for according to the custom of the Jews those days, one word of complaint from Joseph about Mary would have led to her being stoned to death! However, Joseph was a just man, and so he acted differently.

When it was about time for Mary to have her baby, she had to travel with Joseph all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to register themselves there by order of emperor Augustus. While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for the delivery. In anguish Joseph searched for a suitable place for the birth of Mary's child, the Saviour, whose guardian he was to be. His entire search yielded no result, and finally they had to take shelter in a cattle shed where Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a manger (cf. Lk 2:1-7). She understood Joseph's concern for her in this trying situation and made it easy for him by willingly giving him full and uncomplaining cooperation. In moments of consolation and of tribulation they were one in mind and heart.

Yet, the trouble did not end there. Herod considered the child a threat to his kingship and so wanted to kill him. An angel of the Lord warned Joseph about it and asked him to take the Baby and the Mother and flee to Egypt. It was night. Joseph woke Mary up urgently. They had to get ready in no time and quit the place at once, leaving behind their home and homeland and everything they owned. With the Child they left for Egypt the same night. No protest, no complaint,

no argument from Mary! In this totally unexpected, sudden and absolutely serious turn of events they cooperated with each other and faithfully followed God's directions (cf. Mt 2:13-14).

By the time Joseph had found a house for the family to stay, got enough employment to earn their livelihood and the family had acquired a working knowledge of the Egyptian language, and they all were getting adjusted and settled in the new environment, it was time for them to return to the land of Israel. Another crisis: leave everything and go back to a country where they had nothing of their own. And again, no protest, no complaint, no hesitation. Mary was all readiness and cooperation. So Joseph followed the instructions given him, took the child and his mother and returned to Israel and settled in Nazareth.

When Jesus was twelve years old, the family went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. After the festival they started back home and travelled a whole day, thinking Jesus was with the group. But they did not find him among relations and friends. Worried and anxious, they went back to Jerusalem, looking for Jesus. It took them three days to reach there; so diligently did they search for him together on the way, helping each other and comforting mutually. Only on the third day did they find the boy Jesus in the temple. He went back with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them (cf. Lk 2:41-51).

In all these instances, the Holy Family sets before us an example worthy of imitation by all families. The example is, of course, not just in the details of their external actions, but in their spirit, intention and disposition. It is an example of mutual understanding, cooperation, respect, concern and support at all times, especially in moments of anxiety and pain. The love

between Joseph and Mary is a sharing in the life together, with a deep respect for each other, a continued mutual solicitude, a growing understanding of and helpfulness to each other and a genuine appreciation between them.

In Mary and Joseph we see trust, faith, mutual acceptance, patience and unity of purpose. They are excellent examples of submission to God and respect for each other. Nazareth can teach us family life in simple ways that are full of meaning. Here we can learn the importance of spiritual discipline and openness to God's voice of wisdom.

Points to Ponder

1. Do you have a happy, cooperative, supportive and loving relationship with your parents and those of your spouse? If there is need to improve that relationship, what can you do about it?
2. If there is a strained relationship within your family or another family or between two families, do you step in to help solve the problem, to mediate, facilitate dialogue, give counsel?
3. Do you think your family life is as beautiful and your home as joyful as you desire? If not, identify the causes and chalk out your plan to better the situation.

This Is a Great Mystery



Right from the earliest times human beings lived and shared life with others of their kind just like the other animals who lived as members of their herds. Group strength and common defence were the main advantages offered by this way of living. The principle of "one for all and all for one" helped to keep the system going.

Being more intelligent, humans are also more selfish. In course of time the herd mentality did not work well for them. It is likely that the system degenerated into "none for anybody else" situation, though the social aspect could not be abandoned altogether. As society advanced towards civilisation, it was found that the best possible solution to this vexed problem was to fix the family as the basic unit and nucleus of the community. Thus the responsibilities of each member of the family came to be well defined. The husband had specific responsibilities towards the wife and vice versa. So also the parents towards children and children towards parents.

This system seems to have worked miracles for the human race. It was as if you found the building blocks for the construction of the house. Society became organised at the grassroots level. It became possible to structure communities according to the demands of the day. Fixing the responsibilities of parents helped to improve the lot of a new generation of children by way of better childcare, food, education, etc. This in turn must have improved the social base of the community. Eventually marriage became an institution in all civilised societies. This could be a natural view of the family.

Even in the early middle ages rooms lacked specific functions. There was very little privacy. Several persons lived, worked, ate and slept in the same room. Later when the modern home took shape, work and residence were located in separate places. In the 17th century, interior spaces began to be differentiated according to their functions. From then on, houses and home comforts have improved tremendously. We are all beneficiaries of this development. It would be a great shame for us if, in spite of all this, our families become a mere collection of individuals who seek only their own pleasure, comfort and identity, with no concern for anyone else. Homes are certainly not meant to be filling stations or stopping places where individuals come to eat, sleep, dress and watch T.V.

Grace Elevates Nature

All religious leaders, great thinkers in their own way, realised the importance of the family for the very survival of society. That is why they enforced this system vigorously. Thus the family came to be held sacred.

In the plan of God, man and woman together make up an integral unit. This is the basis of their equal dignity as human beings, of their mutual gravitation and reciprocity. God created human beings, making them like himself. He created them

male and female" (Gen 1:27). "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife, and they become one" (Gen 2:24). The marriage bond realizes the reciprocity and the complementarity that exists between man and woman in such a profound manner that in the Old Testament it is often referred to as a symbol of the love relationship between God and His people (cf. Hos 1-3; Jer 2-3; Ez 16, 23; Is 54, 62; Song of Songs).

The New Covenant took it to its zenith, fine tuning all aspects of married life and the family, giving it greater meaning and dimension. The core of family life which Jesus Christ propounded is love; it is more giving than taking. He elevated the institution of marriage to the dignity of a sacrament. The natural contract is transformed into a supernatural reality, very much like Christ's union with the Church. The corner stone of this union is self-giving. In the purest love Christ gives himself forever to the Church, his spouse, and makes her his "mystical body". As Pope John Paul II says, "Willed by God in the very act of creation, marriage and family are interiorly ordained to fulfilment in Christ (*Familiaris Consortio*, 3).

Grace calls us to consciousness, thankfulness and generosity in service. Through Christ the Lord, Christian spouses are aware of the origin, excellence and final goal of their marriage. He reveals to all his design for marriage and family through the witness and teaching of the Church and through the lives and works of saintly married people.

"Human beings are not the same as the images proposed in advertising and shown by the modern mass media. They are much more in their physical and psychic unity, as composites of soul and body, as persons. They are much more because of their vocation to love which introduces them as male and female into the realm of the great mystery" (John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 20).

Sanctified by Grace

The famous twentieth century theologian Karl Rahner points out that the different forms of human love which create a truly personal community cannot be compared among themselves in a purely external manner. They have a real reciprocal relationship of conditioning and motivation. In this relationship conjugal love occupies a very special place.

Rahner notes that Christ has founded the Church as a people of God. Christ loves people with a truly human love which is important for the very formation of the Church. Therefore matrimony has a real symbolic function with regard to the love of God in Christ for humanity that is united and sanctified by this love, which is the Church. Such a symbolic capacity which is fundamental and inherent in the nature of the Church effectively actualises the Church itself. As it represents grace, it is a sacrament. The matrimonial "Yes" is one of the important accomplishments of the Church. Why? Because in this "Yes" of her members, the Church shows herself as the mystery of the unity between Christ and the human person.

The sacrament of matrimony, Rahner goes on to explain, is not only comparable to the bond between Christ and the Church. It also contributes to make the Church, in its concrete and historical reality, appear as the spouse of Christ. It bears witness to the fact that in the Church Christ is united definitely with humanity.

According to Rahner, if the Church becomes present in matrimony, i.e., in conjugal society, then a valid marriage, sanctified by grace and lived in a holy manner, is the smallest society. It is the smallest, yet true community of those who are redeemed and sanctified. It rests on the same foundation on which the Church rests. It is therefore the smallest but true Church — the domestic Church.

A Sacred Covenant

Marital communion is a sacred covenant in which the husband and the wife "give themselves to each other and accept each other" (G.S. 48). From this communion-covenant originates the family. As the sacrament of their covenant, marriage is a "great mystery". It expresses the spousal love of Christ for his Church: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word" (Eph 5:25-26).

Celine has been happily married for fifteen years now, and is the mother of two lovely children. She wrote to me, quite correctly, I believe, that at the moment of the wedding celebrations the spouses hardly recognise the depth and gravity of the responsibility they are assuming. When they stand on the first step of family life, i.e., in front of the altar during the celebration of the liturgy of marriage, and promise to God that they will share their whole life with the partner decided upon by parents and elders, they are making the deepest commitment of life. The challenges this commitment involves and its practical implications will unfold only gradually as the newly weds proceed along their life together.

After the nuptial ceremony, observes Celine, the young lady who steps into another family agrees, acclimatises and adjusts herself to the new family and environment in a marvellous way. This is certainly a precious grace God gives her and the family whose part she now becomes. The bride's family becomes part of the bridegroom's family, and the young husband immediately accepts his new relations as his own people. Thus a lasting relationship is established between the two families. Isn't that wonderful?

The ability to agree with the other members of both the families is of utmost importance. The young lady who steps into a new family and becomes a member of it should be able to adjust the best way possible not only with the new environment but with every member of her new family. Mutual understanding and adjustment are essential to the peace and well-being of the family.

Such adjustment is not only necessary but also quite possible if every member puts mind and heart into it. The broadmindedness to see one's new relations as one's own people and the willingness to make concessions and compromises as and when the occasion arises are necessary here. In family life, experience is always a great teacher. The three most important constituents of family life are sincerity, mutual trust and love. These are the mainstay of the family.

Marriage Is a Sacrament

During the short reign of Pope John Paul I, a group of elderly couples celebrating the golden jubilee of their wedding went for an audience with him. During the friendly and joyful meeting, one lady said, "Holy Father, how blessed you are to choose the priesthood! We, on the other hand, have fallen into this trap of matrimony." The Pope smiled and said, "Do you know, good lady, how many sacraments there are?" She replied promptly, "Seven, Holy Father." He said, "But according to you Jesus instituted six sacraments and a trap!" Everybody burst out laughing, but the lesson was clear to all.

Marriage is sacred. It is a sacrament, and like all the other sacraments, it is holy. The life of Tobias and Sara is an example and inspiration for all married couples (cf. Tobit 8:4-8). One who enters into the sacred covenant of marriage has to adhere to it faithfully all one's life (cf. 1 Cor 7:10-11). As Jesus

himself says, "So they are no longer two, but one. Man must not separate, then, what God has joined together" (Mt 19:6).

Jesus speaks about the matrimonial alliance as a gift and a very high commitment. This is the clear plan of God. Therefore it is not lawful for man to repudiate his wife (cf. Mt 19: 3-6).

Right from the early times the Church has seen in the nuptial bond the living sign of the living union between Christ and the Church, his spouse. Referring to the matrimonial union between husband and wife, St Paul says, there is a deep secret truth revealed in this, which he understands as applying to Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5: 31-32). Therefore, in their reciprocal love, the spouses are called to mirror the loyal and total love with which the Lord loves the Church (cf. Eph 5: 21-33).

At the Last Supper, a peak point in his life, Jesus said, "This is my body given for you." Thus his body becomes the gift, the possibility of communion. In the marital embrace, the husband and the wife give their bodies to each other without reserve. Here the body is not seen as a lump of flesh, but in its profound identity as the sacrament of presence. This sexual act expresses their deep desire to share their lives. That is why it is a sacrament of Christ's unity with the Church. The mutual love of the spouses should enhance their common growth in faith and in the covenant with God (cf. 1 Pet 3:1-7).

This lofty and demanding vision of matrimony did not prevent the nascent Church from affirming the great value of virginity. When it is lived as a sign of the Kingdom, it is capable of a profound and extensive relationship of reciprocity in the communion with God and with others, as St Paul explains in 1 Cor 7.

Marriage and consecrated virginity express two vocations that come from God's infinite love. These vocations lead the persons concerned to celebrate His glory with all their life. In the external and indissoluble covenant between the two spouses the Church recognises a sacrament. The spouses themselves are the ministers of the sacrament which communicates divine grace to the two. It is the grace of encounter with Christ, the Spouse of the Church. This sacrament is made holy by the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit and the promise of the faithfulness of God, not only in the liturgical celebration of the sacrament, but also in every instant of conjugal life.

New Relationship with the Holy Trinity

The sacrament of matrimony introduces the spouses into a new and vivifying relationship with the Holy Trinity.

Relationship with the Father

Matrimony is an act by which the spouses consecrate themselves together to God the Father, and the Father welcomes them. It is He who has called them to reciprocal self-giving. The spousal character of the alliance which the Eternal Father has gratuitously established with humans shines forth in this sacramental sign.

The reciprocity in which the marriage alliance manifests itself is a sign of the reciprocity which God grants to creatures as well as demands from them. The bond that exists between husband and wife, which is a gift of the Father and which He welcomes, reflects the same bond which He has established with His people. I believe, it is worth quoting here Hosea 2: 18-23:

“At that time I will make a covenant with all the wild animals and birds so that they will not harm my peo-

ple. I will also remove all weapons of war from the land, all swords and bows, and will let my people live in peace and safety.

Israel, I will make you my wife; I will be true and faithful; I will show you constant love and mercy and make you mine for ever. I will keep my promise and make you mine, and you will acknowledge me as Lord.

At that time I will answer the prayers of my people Israel. I will make rain fall on the earth, and the earth will produce corn and grapes and olives.

I will establish my people in the land and make them prosper. I will show love to those who were called "Unloved", and to those who were called "Not-My-People". I will say, "You are my people," and they will answer, "You are our God."

On the basis of this divine promise, the spouses can mutually promise faithfulness for ever "in joy and in sorrow, in health and in illness", with the irreversible commitment to love and honour each other all the days of their life. To put it briefly, in relationship with the Father, marriage is a sacramental sign of the unity of the spouses with God in time and in eternity.

Relationship with the Son

The matrimonial bond is a sign of the indissoluble relationship that exists between Christ and the Church. Matrimony is an efficacious gift of grace ordained to the perfect unity of the spouses. In the light of this it becomes clear that the conjugal communion is the proper purpose of the sacrament because it makes visible the union of Christ with his Church, a union that nourishes the sacrament itself.

As Vatican II says, "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church (cf. Eph 5:32). The spouses thereby help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and by the rearing and education of their children. And so, in their state and way of life, they have their own special gift among the people of God" (L.G. 11).

The demand of fidelity and indissolubility of marriage is founded on the vocation of the two to be, through their love, the sacrament of the indissoluble union of the Lord Jesus with his Church. Naturally the demand is also founded on the mutual and total self-gift without reserve. Such self-gift is necessary for building up the full and perfect unity of the two which is the foundation of the family.

The path of fidelity acquires a continuous and ever new commitment which does not permit their love to be vitiated through lack of dialogue or of generosity to each other. The marriage commitment urges each of the two to take initiative in moving towards each other even if the other fails to do the same. Here the spouses are called to follow the example of Christ who loves the Church and each one of us in spite of all our failures and demerits.

Relationship with the Holy Spirit

The sacramental event of matrimony is a sign and instrument of the covenant. In the mystery of the Trinity, the Spirit is the bond of eternal love and mutual openness of the Father and the Son. In the same way His action on the spouses makes them deepen their covenant of human consent with His grace. Thus their love becomes rooted in the very unity of God. Grace enriches their love and enables the natural tendency of conjugal love to bring forth and nurture offspring.

In the marital union, open to fecundity in a responsible manner, the spouses are for each other the channel for the gift of the Holy Spirit and the living sacrament of union with Christ. The Holy Spirit, the invisible principle of unity of the Church, makes the spouses a sign and instrument of communion of the Church. He urges them to be witnesses and builders of the unity and growth of the people of God. They do this above all through the education of their children.

In the sacrament of matrimony, the spouses promise each other a communion of life, ideals, aims and plans, and above all a covenant of love. Matrimony means a mutual gift of two persons. As Bernard Haring observes, "it can make visible the covenant of love and fidelity between Christ and the Church in so far as the love, fidelity and reconciliation of the spouses become a visible witness to each other, to their children and to the world" (*The Sacraments in a Secular Age*, London 1976, 195).

Marriage is a visible sign of grace for the spouses, for their children and for the people who live around and about them. Spouses have therefore the duty to witness Christ to the world and to contribute tangibly to its salvation. As the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus to enable him to fulfil his mission (cf. Lk 4:17-21) so the same Spirit is upon the spouses, enabling them to fulfil their mission.

What the Masters Teach

All the sacraments of the new Testament give grace and therefore are salvific. Marriage, being such a sacrament, is a sanctifying reality. It is interesting to see how some of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church grappled with this reality and explained it in different ways. On many counts they are surprisingly close to what we have said hitherto.

Clement of Alexandria (third century Father of the Church, perhaps a priest, leading figure in the early theological school of Alexandria) is of opinion that the virtue in marriage is greater than that in virginity, because there are more temptations in married life which the spouses are to overcome.

Peter Lombard (Bishop of Paris, celebrated theologian, he lived from 1095 to 1160) teaches that there is a double union between Christ and the Church. Both have the same will; so there is a spiritual union. In the Incarnation there is also a carnal union between Christ and the Church. Matrimony is a sign and figure of this double union. It is a spiritual union through covenant and carnal union through coitus. For Peter Lombard, consent is the essence of matrimony. This union is a great sacrament in reference to Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:31-32).

We notice that according to Peter Lombard, marriage is a sign in two ways: according to the union of hearts and minds and according to the union of bodies. The first is a sign of the union of the will, or a spiritual union or union of charity, between Christ and the Church. The second is a sign of the conformity of nature, realised through the Incarnation, between Christ and the Church. In defence of the marriage between Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph, Peter Lombard follows the theory that perfect marriage is contracted through consensus, and coitus is not essential for marriage.

St Thomas Aquinas (Dominican Monk, Confessor and Doctor of the Church, outstanding theologian and exponent of scholastic philosophy, he lived from 1225 to 1274) observes that matrimony is a natural reality, inherent in the nature of the human being. It was directed to the begetting of children which was necessary even before the sin. So it was instituted before the sin. According to him a sacrament is a sign of a

sacred reality. Matrimony as a sacrament signifies an office of nature; it is not only a remedy against sin.

The inclination of nature towards matrimony does not oblige anyone in the manner of a precept. The divine precept has not been revoked, and it will become obligatory if and when the situation demands it, i.e., the human race is reduced to a small number of persons and there is need to increase and multiply.

Aquinas holds that before Christ matrimony was a natural reality willed by God. Already then it was a sacrament in the "improper sense", as it signified a sacred reality. It was instituted in the new law so far as it represents the mystery of Christ's union with the Church, and in this respect it is a sacrament of the new law. It confers grace "ex opere operato", i.e., by the enactment of the deed.

He teaches that wherever God gives the faculty to do a thing, He gives also the helps whereby the human being is enabled to make becoming use of that faculty. Therefore, he holds, in as much as it is contracted in the Christian faith, matrimony is able to confer the grace which enables the spouses to do those works which are required of them. Since in matrimony man receives by divine institution the faculty to cooperate with his wife to beget children, he also receives the grace without which he cannot becomingly do so. The whole reality of marriage is sanctified by sacramental grace. The marital act is meritorious. Grace comes to perfect nature, not to destroy it. As a sacrament, matrimony signifies and causes grace. The grace given not only hinders sin but also inclines to good. In the sacramental sign there is a causality and a participation in the mystery of Christ. Marriage also brings a reward on account of charity.

In the view of Aquinas matrimony is not an indulgence but a good reality willed by God. Sexuality which is intrinsic

to human nature is good, and the sexual act can be meritorious if done in grace and for the three goods: fidelity, progeny and sacrament. The morality of coitus comes not from indulgence but from its finality. (The above points are taken from Aquinas's *IV Sent.* Dist 26; his *Summa Theol.* Q 42 and *Summa Theol.* III, 72.)

St Bonaventure (Franciscan Monk, Bishop Confessor and Doctor of the Church, close friend of St Thomas Aquinas, he lived from 1221 to 1275) holds that matrimony has a rich significance. It signifies interior union, the consensus of minds. The bodily union signifies the union between Christ and the Church, or between God and the soul. Bonaventure is of opinion that consensus belongs to the substance of matrimony while coitus belongs to its perfection.

For Bonaventure, matrimony has three important characteristics.

1. It is a participation in the divine love communicated to us in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. By their conjugal union the spouses unite themselves also with Christ.
2. Only through the intervention of the Church does the sign, i.e., conjugal love, acquire the character of a gift of grace.
3. Matrimony is similarly a participation in the union of Christ with his Church which is unique, fruitful and indissoluble. The three goods of matrimony (i.e., fidelity, children, sacrament) signify these three characteristics.

Bonaventure speaks of the double union between Christ and the Church: union through charity and union through conformity. The first type of union is sufficient in marriage. Therefore the marriage between St Joseph and the Virgin Mary was good. (These points are collected from Bonaventure's *IV Sent.* D. 26, art 2; D 31, art 1.)

In concluding this chapter on the mystery of marriage, we can confidently say that a matrimonial relationship, purified in divine love and established in faith, is enriched by the experience of God's presence and power. In and through their relationship as husband and wife, married people express their intimacy with the Holy Trinity. The characteristics of the Church are also reflected in the sacrament of matrimony, for it calls the spouses to be united (one), Trinitarian (holy), open to the world (catholic) and communicators of the good news of Jesus (apostolic). Sacramental love is a powerful witness and an encouraging example to others. Thus it enriches the Church, the Body of Christ.

Points to Ponder

1. Do you experience that your marriage is a sign of God's love? In your daily living, are you conscious that your marriage is a sacrament? How can you live this reality in a more conscious manner?
2. Are you really happy with the degree of communication between you and your spouse? Do you think you can do something specific to improve it?
3. Communicate your love to your spouse by word or deed at least once a day. Give him or her a compliment each day.



Joys and Demands of Love



To love means to encounter, and to encounter, people have to agree to go out of themselves in order to go towards others.

On 20 February, 2000, *The Times of India* carried this report. Nirmala and Krishnanath were married 63 years ago, way back in 1937. Theirs was a marriage by choice. The husband proudly says, "She won over the whole family. Todate she remains everybody's favourite aunt, sister-in-law, grandma. She loves people; I am lucky." On her part Nirmala finds him "good natured and kind. He doesn't drink or smoke, and is a loving husband."

After sixty three years of marital bliss, neither the husband nor the wife recalls having had any major difference of opinion ever. "I never argue with him," she dimples. "What's the point?" he asks. "All these new-fangled ideas about ego clashes are just so much nonsense. She is my partner, not my competitor. I am what I am because of her. She gave me her

strength." The couple believes that "once you choose your partner, it's for life. That is true love." These people have weathered sixty three years together, stood by each other through illness, happiness and boredom, their love undimmed.

Amy and Caridade were married 52 years ago. All these years they have sailed together, but calm waters haven't always been their lot. "My life has been one of obedience to God's will," says Amy. "I was brought up as an orphan in a boarding school. One Saturday evening, fifty two years ago, I was told to walk across Backbay Street and that my future husband would be watching me. I was wearing a borrowed rust coloured frock and bright red lipstick, also borrowed. He took one look at me and liked me. So he said to me, "I am not well-off, but what I have I will give you." I knew then that Caridade Tavares was a good man.

The years were not easy for the couple, what with making both ends meet and what with having constantly to change houses. "Todate we don't have our own house," Caridade confesses with a smile, "but Amy is not the complaining sort. And I am not an ambitious man." Amy adds proudly, "Oh, but he was always hard working. Even after his regular clerical job, he would work a few hours elsewhere, and then at 9 P.M. stride home like he was lifted by the breeze. He still had the energy to take me to all the dances in town."

As late as 1998, life sprung a fresh trial when Caridade's leg was amputated after an infection set in. "He has been confined to bed since then, but keeps smiling," says Amy brightly. "Surely God is at the centre of our marriage; that accounts for our contentment."

This sharing by these elderly couples with more than half a century of experience in married life, is a precious testimony, a valuable lesson for younger couples and newly-weds. They

are not theorising but speaking from their lived experience which can encourage, support and guide married people and those contemplating marriage. Their sense of belonging to each other, their enduring love and faithfulness, and their interdependence are ideals every married couple does well to cultivate. Joys and sorrows come and go, but love abides. And love binds everything together, and makes life beautiful and meaningful.

No Neutrality in Love

Love is a relationship. It is not gregariousness, fellowship or a sentiment. Two people are in relationship when each of them can make a difference to the other. There can be no neutrality here, no indifference. If there is any semblance of neutrality, it means what we have is only co-existence and not relationship.

A loving relationship fully respects the freedom of the partner. If I make myself responsible *for* my partner, I shall be in fact curtailing his or her freedom. I shall then be dominating the other, constantly trying to protect or punish, lead or restrain him or her. With such an attitude, I shall ever be trying to keep the other tied to my apron strings.

One should rather be responsible *to* a person, not *for* a person. The individual who is responsible to someone will be able to respond to that person, whatever choices he or she may freely make. This involves a relationship of listening, caring and respecting the freedom of the other. To listen means to recognise the pain that goes unexpressed by words, the fears that are not stated, the bitterness that is masked by cynicism. To listen is to hear with understanding and without judging. Only when we have accepted our own powerlessness and realised that God's healing power is best manifested

in our weakness, shall we be able to listen to the other without being threatened.

I believe it is worth quoting here the Apostle Peter whom the Lord appointed the chief shepherd of his flock:

"In the same way you wives must submit to your husbands, so that if any of them do not believe God's word, your conduct will win them over to believe. It will not be necessary for you to say a word, because they will see how pure and reverent your conduct is... For the devout women of the past who placed their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful by submitting to their husbands. Sarah was like that; she obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are now her daughters if you do good and are not afraid of anything.

"In the same way you husbands must live with your wives with the proper understanding that they are the weaker sex. Treat them with respect, because they also will receive, together with you, God's gift of life. Do this so that nothing will interfere with your prayers" (1 Pet 3: 1-7).

Matrimony is the noblest school of all-embracing love. It enhances the very life of the Church as a community of love and trust. The full meaning of sexuality unfolds in a marriage that expresses and nourishes respect, kindness, gentleness and commitment. In the indissoluble community of husband and wife, they share their experiences and ideals, forming a fruitful synthesis of love of God and love of neighbour, of responsibility towards the coming generations and towards the world around them.

Bernard Haring, the well-known theologian, believes that wherever "two persons are united in an integrated, faithful marital love that helps them and others to become more fully an image of God, there is a privileged sign of God's presence." He notes that in Israel, God frequently compares with

marriage the covenant which liberates the people. This comparison, signifying the good news, would not have been possible if there had not existed genuine experiences of good and faithful marriages. In fact, whatever is good, honest, just, right, fostering maturity and liberating in marriage throughout history is a sign of God's love and salvation (cf. *Sacraments in a Secular Age*, Slough, 1976, 189).

Love Is the Foundation

The family cannot live without love.

If the husband and the wife are reconciled with God, they can be also reconciled among themselves. They should ask themselves whether they are building up a family according to the plan of God or are merely living the trend of the society in which they are inserted. They must ask themselves if they are giving shape to a union in which faithful, indissoluble and fruitful love becomes stronger day by day. A family has to be the smallest community of life and love.

God has written His idea of the family in our hearts. Man and woman instinctively desire a relationship of total and faithful love in which each of them can trust the other and entrust their lives to each other. This is a desire that wells up in the hearts of all.

The more of goodness, love and virtue a marriage fosters, the more of a sacrament it becomes. In this sense the marriage between two good non-baptised persons is nobler and holier than the marriage between two baptised persons who do not care for faith, truth, justice and love. At the same time it should be noted that a good Christian marriage offers two advantages, that of a clear consciousness of the presence of Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that of the special support it receives from the Church and gives to the Church.

Marriage is good, viable and joyful if it is built on a deep and strong foundation of love.

Genuine Love Is Sustaining

In marriage, this means the spouses are available physically and emotionally to each other. They give personal and quality time — time of attention, affection and appreciation — to each other; they are present to one another and enjoy one another's presence. They are also emotionally tuned to each other, responding helpfully and understandingly to sentiments, moods, feelings and emotions of each other. Each one is sensitive to the signals and stimuli that come from the other. One cares for the other and shares his or her personal world with the other by communicating one's deep, real, inner self. This enables them to avoid or resolve conflicts and to maintain a reassuring and sustaining relationship.

Genuine Love Is also Healing

As they live together and rub shoulders, the spouses discover their own and their partner's strengths and weaknesses. Unexpressed desires, hidden fears, masked anxieties, suppressed moods, etc., can come to light. Any one of the spouses can be affected by feelings of being ignored, unloved, and insecure. With what attitude the other responds to such feelings, how supportive he or she is in dealing with the question, is of vital importance for the survival and thriving of the marriage. The anxious one needs to be reassured. The angry one needs to be understood, comforted and made to feel good. The lonely one needs the presence and companionship of the other. The one who feels unloved or unwanted needs to be given a sense of belonging through affection, appreciation and affirmation. It is the duty and the privilege of the partners to respond to these needs of the one whom he or she loves.

A young man, nearing his second wedding anniversary, says:

"Before we were married, we said, 'We've talked about everything; we agree on everything, or at least the major parts. Therefore we're compatible and things will work out accordingly.' But then the marriage bliss wears off and the working begins and rebegins, the dying and rising. I doubt that we're emotionally prepared for it.

"I think we're in the dark most of the time about what will work and how, and either fearful that we might choose the wrong 'strategy' or too ego-centred to care. Learning to deal with the motions of those situations is really hard.

"For me, the way out is to pray to God for guidance in the process, and to listen to His guidance for help. Then it's a matter of being willing to do it faithfully without measuring the personal cost, and to believe that married life is not a series of problems to be solved by our limited wills. Marriage is rather a series of growth experiences God leads us through because He loves and wants us to come to know and trust Him through these experiences" (quoted by K.F. Hart and T.N. Hart in *Early Years of Marriage*).

Caring and Serving

Love, care and solicitude can make up for the want of all other things. I am told of a young lady who did not have much beauty or brains. She was not good at studies, and everyone considered her dull and useless. When she was married and taken to her husband's home, her mother-in-law was cold and indifferent to her. Early in the morning the next day this young lady got up and boiled a nice cup of coffee and brought it to her mother-in-law who was still in bed. "I don't need it here. Take it away. When I need, I will go to

table and take it," grumbled the old lady. With a smile the daughter-in-law stayed at her side and gently persuaded her to drink that coffee.

That was the beginning of a close relationship between the two ladies. The old lady began to love and trust her daughter-in-law more than her own son and daughter. The young lady took such loving care of the old lady that the latter would feel lonely when the former went to stay with her parents for a few days. When the old lady who was sick suddenly got worse, she asked for the daughter-in-law who happened to be away. The young lady came running and knelt down at the bedside. The dying lady placed her hand on her daughter-in-law's head and blessed her. Then she breathed her last.

For the old lady, and for everyone in the home this girl with little beauty or intelligence, was the best person in the world. Her humble service and loving care endeared her to everyone. In her own words, "I thank God because the love I have given, I have received back tenfold!"

Recently a well-known advocate, now retired, told me this story. One holiday he was at home and wanted some peaceful rest. But the washbasin was blocked and he failed to let the water out. He understood this was due to the carelessness of the servant. Much annoyed, he scolded his wife for not supervising what the servant was doing. The lady said not a single word. She merely brought the instruments to unblock the basin and handed them over to him. He took them and did the work, and the problem was solved. His wife's meekness and silence touched him, and he asked pardon from her for the shouting. What could have grown into a fight ended peacefully because of the way the lady handled it. The gentleman told me, "This happened many years ago but its memory is fresh in my mind."

A Gift and a Sacrifice

When needs like love, self-worth, a sense of belonging and autonomy are not met, the marriage is in danger of breaking up. We are here speaking of genuine need and not just any kind of desire or expectation. Take time daily to be together, peacefully and unhurriedly. Be fully present in body and mind, and be sensitive to the presence of the partner. Take ten minutes to jot down your feelings about the relationship and another ten minutes to share the strongest feelings. It will be wonderful if the spouses can do this exercise every day. That will enable them to discover the beauty and value of each other by listening to what goes on in one's own and other's heart. This in turn will promote peace, joy and communion.

When Adam and Eve became partners in the first ever marriage bond, she became for him flesh of his flesh and life of his life. God who is Love created human beings in His own image and likeness. Therefore our life also should be a manifestation of love that reflects the loving relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Out of love Jesus made himself a gift and a sacrifice for us humans. He shared our human nature, enabling us to participate in his divine nature. Similarly, married couples too share their lives with each other, for they are no more two. Only such loving communion can build heaven on earth.

Living together under the same roof is no guarantee for a loving and united family. When only the television speaks in a family and the members do not talk to each other, eat with each other or pray together, the family loses its stability and is on the verge of collapse. When the wife shares the defects of her husband with her friends in the Lion's Club or the husband shares the idiosyncrasies of his wife with the lady in the neighbourhood, the collapse is hastened.

Walking Together

Love is indeed demanding. In his *Letter to Families*, # 14, John Paul II says, "Nowadays people need to rediscover this demanding love, for it is the truly firm foundation of the family, a foundation able to 'endure all things'. According to the Apostle, it is not able to endure all things if it yields to 'jealousies' or if it is 'boastful... arrogant or rude' (cf. 1 Cor 13:5-6). True love, St Paul teaches, is different: 'Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor 13:7)."

St Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives (cf. Eph 5:25). He adds *a fortiori*, "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body" (cf. Eph 5:28-30). The marital covenant implies the joint affirmation of husband and wife: "We shall accept, respect and support each other. We shall love each other and surrender to each other. We shall for ever belong to each other. In good times and in bad, we shall walk the path of life together."

It is in this context of mutual love and acceptance that the spouses are called to "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." They are to walk the path of life with God and with each other.

See what Frederick Ozanam wrote:

"If I ever have to unite my life to another creature, I should like her to be endowed with all those exterior charms which will not make me regret having chosen this instead of the religious life. But above all, I would like her to come to me with a beautiful soul, proved virtue and with something greater than what I have and what I am... I want her to lead me higher and not drag me down..."

"I want her well disposed to my defects, and to carry with me our daily burdens with patient resignation. These are my wishes, these are my dreams about the companion of my life."

To Be One in Spirit

"Give your hearts, but not unto each other's keeping.

For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts."

— Kahlil Gibran

There are people who obstinately stick to a decision once taken, even if it is proved wrong. This is certainly not right. One should be willing to correct, change and improve one's decisions when necessary. Rethinking will often become necessary. In family life there should be no such thing as conflict between "my decision" and "your decision". There should be only "our decision", one common decision of the family, at least in important matters. If there are differences of opinion, each of the spouses should help the other to understand his or her point of view. When they both sit together and discuss the positive and the negative sides of their points of view, a common decision emerges. The most basic requirement for this process is the spouses' firm faith in the sincerity of each other.

A family lady, fully dedicated to house-keeping and the care of her family, wrote to me as follows:

"Our sincerity, tolerance, trust, in fact our entire personality are put to severe test in many circumstances of family life. There are moments when one shudders, seeing the gravity of the problem in hand. When things turn out in a totally unexpected manner and we have no control over the situation, the eyes of any believer will naturally turn to Jesus.

"Occasions can arise when the wife feels whether the *mangala sutra* the husband tied on her neck has turned into a

noose. Even so, it is not a noose that leads to death, but one by which God binds the spouses together and draws them closer to Him! This is our experience. When we were troubled, not knowing what decision to take in some important matters, not knowing whose advice to seek, in utter helplessness we prayed in tears, 'Be with us Lord, and guide us in all our decisions.' We are certain that on each of these occasions God was with us. We have not the least doubt that our family life has brought us closer to Him."

When two persons who have grown up in two different families and two different surroundings begin a new life together, there are bound to be differences in their thoughts and views. It is a great thing if one is able to view life through the eyes of one's partner. That way the spouses will be able to understand many things and learn many things from each other.

Tertullian, a Christian writer of Carthage, Africa, who lived in the latter part of the second century and early part of the third century, writes these famous words about the greatness and beauty of married life in Christ, "How can I ever express the happiness of the marriage that is joined together by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels and ratified by the Father?... How wonderful the bond between two believers, with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service! They are both brethren and both fellow servants. There is no separation between them in spirit or flesh. In fact they are truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit."

Prayer for Spouses*

We thank you, Father,
for all the spouses
whom You have called to love in You

* Translated and adapted from the Italian original of Bruno Forte.

and to be reciprocal signs
of Your tenderness and fidelity.

Their love,

often difficult and demanding
is a reflection among us

of the dialogue and endless gift

that unites You with Your beloved Son.

Thank You for what You have given them,

thank You for those who have loved them,

thank You for those whom they have loved,

thank You for those to whom

through their love

You have given life.

Thank You,

for You have given them

to each other

and, together, to You.

Help the spouses

to live their love

as Christ has loved the Church

in giving himself to the end.

Make them capable

of extending to each other

a continuous and ever new welcome.

Grant that they may always be one,

and through their respect,

solidarity, justice and attention

towards every human being

they may communicate

to all those whom they meet

the love that comes from You.

Bless in Your Spirit

the love of the spouses united in You;

keep it lively and fresh
with a loyalty ever ancient and ever new;
enrich it with the gift of children
sign of Your and their love.
Make their love resplendent and active
in the midst of your people
and guard their mutual self-gift
in simplicity and joy
so that it becomes for all
a sign of the vocation to love
which You have deposited
in the heart of every human being
as a faithful image and likeness of You.
Amen.

Points to Ponder

1. Is the relationship between you and your in-laws a happy one? If not, what remedies can you adopt?
2. Do you try to dominate or boss over your partner or accept him or her on a level of equality? Do you think there is a sufficiently happy sharing of responsibilities between you?
3. Is your dialogue and communication a genuine and deep sharing of yourselves or is it only superficial?
4. Do you remember your spouse's birthday and celebrate it as a special occasion?

Life of Faith in the Family



One day a friend of mine came to my house and I told him about my plan for this book. He felt that I was putting the cart before the horse by writing about growing in sanctity in married life. According to him married life will go well if you have sanctity already for it is the sanctity of the couple that favours good married life and not vice versa. Married life as such does not foster sanctity, he said. I was, of course, not able to accept this exclusivist philosophy.

Let us consider this matter. Sanctity does not come in ready-made packets that you can get and mix with your married life. One cannot be holy first and then start living, whatever be one's vocation. There is need of a growth in sanctity, and this growth comes in and through the joys and struggles of life. It is a process of spiritual development and deepening in actual life. That is where one's spirituality is planted and one grows in holiness. Each person has to build up his or her spirituality according to his or her vocation and state of life.

That is where one exercises faith, hope and charity and practises other Christian virtues.

In our book we are not merely speaking about marriage as a biological or a social reality only; we are speaking about Christian marriage. Those who believe in Christ, follow him and are consecrated in the sacrament of matrimony, live their love for God and neighbour in and through their family life. Matrimony is a sacrament, a sanctifying reality which unfolds and becomes fruitful in holiness as the spouses live their conjugal life. In a good family there is not only tolerance but also cooperation and unity. One helps, supports and encourages others in all that is good. This is precisely why it is a good family. So the equation here works both ways: A good family is ↔ where the members practise faith, hope and charity.

In this relationship one learns how to practise many household virtues and makes progress in them. It is practice that makes perfect; one cannot be perfect and then begin to practise. In all cultures the family is the nursery of life and growth. Virtues and good qualities like truthfulness, honesty, charity, generosity, hospitality, almsgiving, industry, loyalty, faithfulness to social and religious duties are introduced, disciplined and nurtured in the family.

The Family Is the Best School

Vatican Council II calls the family the school of the best human training. A good family always tries to promote and propagate the best attitudes, beliefs and ways of life that are focused upon human interests and values, and thus promotes the flowering of the person. It is in the family that our earthly pilgrimage to God is initiated. It is in the home that faith-formation and development is realised.

"For from the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born. By the grace of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism these are made children of God, thus perpetuating the People of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic Church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation proper to each of them, fostering with special care any religious vocation" (L.G.11).

For this reason the Church invokes the blessing of God on the spouses so that in the union that He has consecrated, they may share the gifts of His love. They may thus become for each other the sign of His presence and be of one heart and soul. By the grace of God, they may through love and good works build up their home, and in the school of the Gospel prepare their children to become worthy members of the Church.

The relationship with the Holy Trinity, sealed in the Sacrament of Matrimony, makes of the spouses an image of the eternal Love. This relationship nourishes in them, and through them in the ecclesial community, the spirit of dialogue and solidarity. While the Church is aware of the greatness of this gift and this mission, she is also aware of the resistance of egoism and the fear to love which makes the realisation of this mission troublesome. Therefore the Church commits herself to help the spouses along the way. She incessantly invokes on them the riches of divine blessing: "May they praise You, O Lord, in joy: may they seek You in suffering; may they enjoy Your friendship in fatigue and Your comfort in necessity; may they pray You in the holy assembly; may they be witnesses of Your Gospel."

The highest expression of human love is the mutual gift of the spouses in the depths of their hearts and becoming one

flesh, which is at the same time an event of grace. In this expression shines out the intensity and the fidelity with which the Holy Trinity is present in the life of human beings and makes it an anticipation and a promise of future glory.

A Life Founded on Faith

Christian life in marriage is founded on faith, is rooted in the Word of God, and forms a line of continuity with the other sacraments. In Christian marriage, the relationship between the husband and the wife has a clear religious structure. It is specifically sacramental. Through its effect the Christian couples are witnesses of a total and faithful human love. It is at the same time a sign of the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church.

The Scheurings have written, "As a married couple, God will channel our love for one another toward the growth of the Church too. The main way for us to serve the Church is through our family, helping each other grow in living a life of love."

The definite orientation of the whole of married life comes to its natural culmination in this new way of being spouses in the Church. The newness is that the very human love, in all its authentic manifestations, "is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church" (G.S.48). Thus the marriage contract becomes a sacrament and conjugal life becomes a consecration.

In this understanding conjugal and family spirituality appears as the way through which the common vocation of all the faithful to sanctity is realised in the specific condition of life in marriage and family. In conjugal life the whole complex of human realities that make up the substance of

family life — such as spouses, children, work, home, apartment, neighbourhood — is the locus where God calls the spouses to sanctity.

As Vatican Council II teaches, "Authentic conjugal love will be more highly priced, and wholesome public opinion created regarding it, if Christian couples give outstanding witness to faithfulness and harmony in that same love, and to their concern for educating their children; also, if they do their part in bringing about the needed cultural, psychological and social renewal on behalf of marriage and the family (G.S. 49).

The Council exhorts the spouses, made in the image of the living God and enjoying the dignity of persons, to be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind, and the work of mutual sanctification. By the joys and sacrifices of their vocation and through their faithful love, they will become witnesses of the mystery of that love which the Lord revealed by his dying and his rising again (cf. G.S. 52).

This vocation is at one and the same time God's gift and human response. It is definitely stretching towards the hereafter and equally commitment here and now. It is the brotherhood of charity within the family and service to the brethren in the Church and in society.

What is new or different in Christian marriage? Certainly it is not the upholding of the value of fidelity, of unity, of fruitfulness, and of service to others which characterise Christian marriage. These ethical values are, at least partly, upheld and lived by couples of other faiths too. Christian marriage is marked by the understanding that all this is not the achievement of human effort or reasoning, but is a gift of God, and hence is grace, given in Christ. The newness is that Christian marriage is the image and likeness of the love and fidelity that exists between Christ and his Church.

A New Appreciation

Sanctity in marriage is not a novelty in the Church; instead, it is a constant reality. In every age and in every cultural and social setting there have been Christian couples who experienced their married life as a practice of faith, love and service. However, the systematic elaboration of family spirituality is of rather recent origin, though its basic lessons are already found in the Bible and in the teachings of the Fathers of the Church.

In the Middle Ages, spiritual writers and teachers emphasised clerical and monastic life, with the consequent undervaluing of the specifically conjugal dimension of the life of the laity. Conventual or religious life came to be identified with the "state of perfection". Married life came to be seen as a kind of state of imperfection or as a pale reflection of the ideal of perfection. Thank God in our contemporary age, with a new appreciation of the lay state and the advance of the "empowerment of the laity", this situation is changing.*

Family spirituality is essentially a spirituality of couples, which does not exclude the other components of the family such as children, parents, grandparents, and in-laws. Only the spouses exchange the sacramental alliance which makes of them a new reality. Theirs is a spirituality that tends to unity which is a constitutive and dynamic element of the sacrament of matrimony. It is therefore a vocation ever more to "become one" (Gen 2: 24), and a commitment to bear witness to the great mystery (cf. Eph 5:32) by which Christ and the Church are two in one. Moving towards this ever

* *Casti Connubi* of Pius XI, 1930, and the teachings of Vatican Council II, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, Nos 47 to 52, have played a very important role in bringing about this change.

deeper unity, fully aware that Christ is the author of the fullness of the unity, is the very essence of conjugal spirituality.

The human and Christian values that build up this path to unity are faithfulness, solidarity and originality. Fidelity of the spouses to each other signifies also fidelity to God's project for one another. Solidarity means "to carry one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2) of every kind, including spiritual. Originality springs from the fact that every couple has to find their own proper itinerary of growth through the daily events and choices and every other means the Spirit uses to indicate the way.

Typically Lay Spirituality

Family spirituality is typically lay spirituality in the sense that it is lived amidst secular realities. These realities are the instruments through which the spirit incessantly calls the spouses to walk together towards God who is Love. Such realities are love, sexuality, children, house, work, money, management, community, neighbourhood, politics, social life, and the like. In living and experiencing these realities, the joy that comes from love, from the sweetness of mutual understanding, from the wonder of the renewal of life, becomes the instrument for participating together in the paschal joy of Christ. This joy is also the motive for thanking and praising God.

Even pain which is an inevitable element of human experience, helps the family to be faithful to the mystery of the Cross. Not only great sorrows like the death of dear ones, but also smaller pains of daily life such as disadvantages, failures, financial difficulties, the struggle to live together, the fatigue of daily labour, can have a positive effect. They become factors that build up the spiritual unity in which "love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail" (1 Cor 13:7).

The participation in the paschal mystery of Christ, the common growth in faith, hope and charity, the common

response to the Spirit who makes his appeal to respond ceaselessly in the hearts of the spouses, pass through such earthly and humble dimensions like conjugal love and sexual union. This is not always easy to understand. It is not easy at the level of experience because of the poverty of the signs themselves. Though they are full of significance, they appear inadequate in front of the "great mystery" which they have to represent and express. Faith assures us that our human poverty is redeemed by the riches of Christ, that psychological and physiological limitations can be overcome by the hope of perfect charity which will be fulfilled in the Kingdom of the Father.

All the same, for the spouses, becoming one flesh in love is a joyful experience. It is a decisive moment that builds up the reality of the two as a couple, to which the very sacrament calls them.

However, this is not the only fundamental element in the life-long communion of the couple. Therefore this aspect of conjugal life should neither be overvalued nor be undervalued. One should walk with clarity in the plane of sexual experience. Similarly, patience also is required here because conjugal chastity is a life-long conquest. It is a field where one is likely to experience ups and downs, pathetic regressions and magnificent recoveries. What is important here is that the spouses should not trust in themselves in walking this path. They should have the clear understanding that Christ the Lord calls and supports them, and that the joy of the Resurrection follows the pain of the Crucifixion.

Ecclesial Spirituality

Family spirituality is ecclesial spirituality. This is one of its fundamental characteristics. Without the ecclesial ambient and support, conjugal spirituality can lose its vitality and become stunted. We need to be well aware that family spirituality

involves not only the couple and the family but also the reality of the Church. She inserts Christians who live in family ever more deeply into her own reality and life. It could not be otherwise because marriage is the sign of the Church (cf. Eph 5:32). Besides, the family is the basic unit of the Church as it is the smallest community of the baptised. The family is the "little church" that opens to the world. Though it is physically limited in its extension, it is responsive to the needs of the whole people of God.

From this emerges an ecclesial spirituality, or better, a spirituality of communion which is typical of family life. It is common, though in different forms, to the child, to the adolescent, to the youth, to the old, to men and to women.

In this context, it is appropriate to think of communities made up of several families coming together. They often include single persons and unmarried youth. This is a new experience which still has to find its proper and precise physiognomy. However, when these communities are products of deliberate choice made in the spirit of service to others and as a stimulus to overcoming outdated and empty structures, they are rich in faith and generosity. The ideal of the "domestic Church" can well be applied to these attempts if local pastors do not let these experiences to be cut off from the ecclesial context. The parish should offer them the means and the opportunity for the flowering of an original spirituality which is familial but not necessarily conjugal, communitarian but not monarchic. This could produce fruits that have never been thought of before, fruits of faith and charity for the whole people of God.

The method of brotherly encounter, of the generous exchange of gifts and talents of each one, of mutual availability, builds up an experience of communion. This experience in

turn leads the group to open itself to the wider community of the place and to be concerned with its needs and problems.

God Is at the Centre

God is love, as St John tells us (cf. 1 Jn 4:8). Let me quote from a letter I received from a senior couple, the principal of a college and his wife: "If we have love as the basis, all the rest like affection, endurance, patience and harmony will come as a consequence. For this very reason, where there is love, there is the presence of God. In the family, the first place is for God. It takes three to marry. When the man and the woman are united in matrimony, they form a communion of three in which God is at the centre. God who is love unites the spouses in love and blesses them. At the wedding of Cana, it was Jesus who turned tasteless water into delightful wine."

With God in our lives, marriages are blessed and families are enriched. When the families live godly lives, their children learn to appreciate God's gift of life and all the good and beautiful things that help and support life. Thus we become living and enthusiastic witnesses to the beauty, excellence and joy of a life of love that progresses according to the plan of God.

The members of the Christian family live under the life-giving law of the Spirit and are freed from the slavery of sin (cf. Rom 8:7). The more open the members are to the guidance of the Spirit, the more clearly their life will manifest the harvest of the Spirit, i.e., "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22). Supported by faith and the ministry of the Church, and living in the presence of Christ, Christian spouses shun every form of behaviour that is unbecoming of them, such as immoral, filthy and indecent actions, worship of idols.

witchcraft, enmity, fight, jealousy, anger, ambition, dissension, envy, drunkenness, and orgies (cf. Gal 5:20).

Whatever is good in them, the good Christian spouses refer to God thankfully. They are humble and honest enough to accept their limitations, failures, and frustrations. The joyful and the painful experiences of love become for them pathways of approaching the Father of infinite love and mercy.

In the sacrament of matrimony, Jesus, the saviour of our race and Spouse of the Church, comes into the lives of the spouses and abides with them. He enables them to love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual bestowal, says Vatican Council II. And so they fulfil their conjugal and familial obligations. The Spirit of Christ suffuses their whole life with faith, hope and charity. Thus they promote mutual sanctification and advance in their own perfection, and thus contribute jointly to the glory of God (cf. G.S.48).

A Family Prayer

Many years ago, I was once in the home of my uncle and aunty (may they rest in peace) in Malabar. In the evening, after the family Rosary, they said also the following prayer. I liked it very much. At my request, aunty wrote it for me. I am quoting it here for the benefit of many more families:

Remember, O God, that You have instituted and blessed this home and our family life. Give Your grace and blessing again to us and our family and make it like unto the Holy Family of Nazareth. Let prayer, work, truth, justice, love, peace, humility, patience and righteousness be the beauty and achievement of our home. Guard and protect husbands and wives and other members of every family, and give them unity of hearts and harmony of minds. In Your mercy grant all of us earthly and spiritual goods.

Grant O Lord, that all married couples may imitate Holy Mary and St Joseph, and live in love, mutual respect, service and forbearance, participating equally in sorrows and joys. May fathers and mothers of families be good Christians capable of providing worthy citizens, priests and religious for the Church, for the family and for human society.

O Lord, who once blessed little children, bless them also now. Keep boys and girls in purity of heart, and guide their minds and intellects in the right path. Make them grow in virtue and learning. Help us to lead them, at the proper time, to the state of life suitable to each one of them. Grant that our children may be our joy and our support both now and in our old age. Guard and protect them so that they may never turn against God or the family.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, in your compassion look after the aged, the sick, the oppressed, the suffering, the widows, the orphans, the unmarried and the poor. O most Sacred Heart, full of mercy, grant your grace to our family and home and all its members. Bless our property and our professions that they may prosper and be in the service of God and neighbour. Amen

Points to Ponder

1. Do you spend some time every day praying together as a family? What about participating in the Mass at least once during the weekdays?
2. How do you practise faith, hope and charity in your daily life at home and outside?
3. Have you given shape to your own family spirituality? Sit together and plan a spiritual renewal in your family.



Parent-Child Relationship



“A man and a woman joined together in matrimony become partners in a divine undertaking. Through the act of procreation, God’s gift is accepted and a new life opens to the future,” says Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*, No 43.

The natural and normal consequence of the communion of love and sexual intimacy between the spouses is the child. Fecundity is certainly a human value. In itself, copula is a creative gesture, an act of faith in human being. It is a looking beyond the errors of the past and the pains of the present; it is throwing a bridge into a future. In conjugal spirituality, procreation is a divine call to the couple to get out of their world of two and become a gift to the world. As a means of procreation, sexual union already contains such a vocation. Therefore, also those couples who do not have children are not to close themselves in a world of two but to live in charity and fraternal relationship with the rest of society.

There can be no sterility in Christian marriage as it is a call to service in love for the little ones, the poor and the marginalized. No matter whether they do or do not have children, Christian spouses are destined to become "fathers" and "mothers" through their choice of generous availability to other persons, in the Church and in society at large. The apostolate of married persons and families is of unique importance for the Church and the civil society, as Vatican Council II says (cf. AA 11).

A Saving Reality

Family life becomes noble and beautiful, and a saving reality if the parents are wise enough to allow and encourage their children to grow more and more responsible and more and more mature. Rather than impose their authority on their children, they will convince, educate, motivate and persuade them to decide with discernment and to act with responsibility.

The whole universe and all living beings have the fatherhood of God as their source (cf. Eph 3:14-16). John Paul II points out that no living being on earth except humans was created in the image and likeness of God. According to him, "Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining biologically similar to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a 'likeness' to God which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love" (cf. *Letter to Families*, 1994, No 6).

By becoming parents, the husband and the wife make their family more complete. Without children, human communities break down and run the risk of disappearing from the world scene. A child is a gift to the entire family and to every member. A child is verily a link that unites the whole family as well as a link with the future generation.

As John Paul II says, "Fruitful married love expresses in serving life in many ways. Of these ways, begetting and educating children are the most immediate, specific and irreplaceable" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 41). Transmission of life is the most precious service that the family can do to society. The Church never tires of reminding couples of their responsibility to protect life at every stage, right from the moment of conception. She urges couples to give all possible assistance — physical, intellectual, affective, social, moral and spiritual — to a new life and to bring it to its full growth and maturity.

Christian parents extend their love also outside the boundaries of flesh-and-blood relationship. Knowing that every human being is a child of God, they will respond generously to the children of other families who are in need of material or other support and help. They will be willing to adopt and look after abandoned or lost children and give them the affection of the family and enable them to experience the love and providence of God (cf. *Ibid*). "Would any of you who are fathers give your son a stone when he asks for bread? Or would you give him a snake when he asks for a fish" (Mt 7:9-10)?

A Well-knit Community

St Paul has some sound advice for children and parents, "Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents, for this is the right thing to do. 'Respect your father and mother' is the first commandment that has a promise added: 'so that all may go well with you, and you may live a long time in the land.' Parents, do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry. Instead, bring them up with Christian discipline and instruction" (Eph 6:1-4).

The family is a well-knit community where intense interpersonal relationships prevail between spouses, between

parents and children and among children. God wants the children to honour the parents, and He has attached the blessing of a long life to this honouring (cf. Ex 20:12). Reciprocally, this commandment obliges the parents to speak and behave in a manner that will enable the children to honour them. As Pope John Paul II says, "the commandment 'honour your father and your mother' indirectly tells the parents: honour your sons and your daughters. They deserve this because they are alive, because they are who they are, and this is true from the first moment of their conception. The fourth commandment then, by expressing the intimate bonds uniting the family, highlights the basis of its inner unity" (*Letter to Families*, No 15).

In the Book of Ecclesiasticus, Ben Sira the author offers some very useful advice to sons and daughters of any place and any time. They should love and respect their parents, and look after them with love when they are old. For doing so they will be rewarded with rich spiritual and material blessings. Their sins will be forgiven, their prayers will be heard, their own children will be kind to them in their old age, and God will grant them long life. Even if the father lacks understanding, do not grieve him but show forbearance (cf. 3: 2-14).

Ben Sira speaks of the obligations of children towards their parents. Parents too have corresponding obligations to their children. If the parents neglect their duties, fail to do what is right and just, and ignore what God expects of them, then they cannot expect anything better from their children. If their children turn out to be negligent, disobedient and rebellious, more often than not they should blame themselves rather than the children.

Among humans, unlike in animals, a father or mother is much more than a mere progenitor. A parent is a generative

person in ways beyond the biological. Psychological and emotional relationship between the parent and the child forms the basis for a spiritual relationship. Spiritual parenting means fostering the spiritual potential of the child, inculcating a sense of personal identity, interior peace and joy, promoting intellectual and emotional maturity, and influencing moral and religious values. To be a parent in the spiritual sense means to nurture the child into manhood or womanhood.

Children deeply need the presence and company of their parents, though they may not say so, and though at times they may behave in an irritating manner. Joseph Martos speaks of a little boy who was irritating everyone at a picnic. His father called him over to play catch with him. Suddenly he was a model child, trying hard to throw as far and as accurately as his father did. After a half hour of this, he was content to play with the other children without making a fuss. Once his need to be fathered was met, he could relate to others in a healthier way.

It is essential for good parenting to spend quality time interacting with the child so as to let the child feel wanted, loved and affirmed. Food, clothing, luxury or the best education make no substitute for giving yourself to your child: you are a basic need of your child. The time you spend talking with your children about what they have seen and heard and thought is very important for them — and for you. To neglect a child and to deprive it of your attention and affection is to cripple that child emotionally and spiritually.

At the same time we should not forget that children whose parents do everything for them grow up feeling they are unable to do anything themselves. Giving children what we think they need deprives them of a greater need — a sense of self-worth and a confidence in their own abilities. That is certainly an impoverishment of their self-image, and a hindrance to the development of their personality.

Parents Set the Pattern

Children, especially young children, learn more from example than from precept. Children pick up the values which they see their parents put into practice. If the parents do not spend time with their children doing what is important, the children will not recognize it as important. They learn what they see, hear and live with. Let the children see their parents praying, going to church, helping others, doing charity, etc. Involve children in giving alms, in organising and saying prayers at home, etc. Parents who give good example of obedience to the divine law and to the laws of their country can expect their children to be faithful to their duties to God, to parents and to fellow humans. There can, of course, be exceptions, but in general the vast majority of children follow the pattern set by their parents. I have learnt that if a hen lays her eggs standing, her daughters carry on that tradition.

Recently I read a joke in *Household Humour* by Judson Cornelius (Better Yourself Books, P.B. 9814, Bandra, Mumbai 400050). Two prized pickpockets met, fell in love and were married. Their dream was some day to have a child who would grow up to be the number one pickpocket in the whole world. One day the wife announced she was going to have a baby. The day came and the baby was born with his fist clenched tight. Gentle prodding made the infant open his clenched fist — to reveal the wedding ring of the midwife!

In modern times, children in many families experience the absence of parents. Children are often left to themselves as both parents are working. Even when the parents return after work, they are either too tired or too busy cooking, shopping, socialising, etc., to have time to be with the children. The result is that children do not receive the affection and the intimacy of their parents which they need so badly. Thus a deep and important need is not fulfilled. If the parents have

no time for children, when these children become parents, they are likely to follow the same tradition. No wonder, the family unity is gradually lost and children become estranged from parents. They become disobedient, irreverent and rebellious. In most of the cases, the major part of the responsibility lies with the parents.

Parents are people, real human beings. Let the children experience that. The father and the mother need to make an effort to come across to their children as real persons whom they can accept and love. The attitude and behaviour of the parents have to be such that the children relate happily with them, and not see them as distant and superior beings living in splendid isolation and wielding authority.

Rather than spend all the leisure time in clubs, social functions and parties on every holiday, parents should spend more time with their children, teaching them many things, helping them with their lessons, telling them family stories, playing and relaxing with them. Recounting family stories to children is important because through them they acquire knowledge of the family history and cultivate a deep sense of belonging. On working days, in many homes, the parents leave for work when the children are still asleep, or return home when the children are already in bed. There are cases of children not seeing their parents for several days, in spite of living in the same house. Ways and means have to be found to minimize the damage caused by this.

There has been increasing evidence in recent times that low self-esteem, anti-school attitudes and delinquency in boys trace back their source to lack of parental involvement with them. This type of "dad deficit" affects girls too, as their need for a positive paternal role model is unfulfilled, and this in turn affects their choice of their future husbands.

The Challenge of Parenting

Parents are the immediate teachers, guides and examples the children follow. Good parents begin the task of nurturing their child's growth in a loving environment. At the same time they strengthen and deepen their own relationship with God. In daily living parents help form their child's faith. They set an example of Christian living by their words and actions, and show true Christian devotion to their children by fostering a spirit of kindness and forgiveness. Above all, they give spiritual support as the child grows in faith, and provides for education in Catholic faith.

Writing to me, one mother remarked that parents should be able to bring up their children in a background that constantly changes according to the times. Today's parents are rearing a generation that is progressing extremely fast on many counts. Therefore the training, guidance and value system they offer their children should be updated, adapted and matching to the challenge of the times.

"For thier souls dwell," says Kahlil Giban,
"in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday."

Yet, keeping up with the changing fashions and times may not always produce the desired effect on the children. All the same, while guiding the children in the right way, telling them good things and showing them good example, couples experience joy and satisfaction in fulfilling their duty as parents. Looking after the home and the children God has given brings a deep sense of contentment which, this lady said, she

habitually experiences. For her, looking after the children was not at all a distasteful burden.

In family life, while giving themselves to one another, the husband and the wife give not only themselves but also the reality of their offspring. The child becomes a living sign of their love and a permanent symbol of their marital unity. Thus the child is an inevitable and inseparable synthesis of their being father and mother. Parents do well to remember that children are God's gifts to them. When parents are still young, children are a joy to them; when they are old, children are their comfort.

In bearing and bringing up children parents are God's partners in the ongoing creation. Therefore they are expected to manifest a certain maturity in their own lives. Then they can look after their children properly and bring them up as mature persons. Maturity is of different kinds — physical, mental, social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, political, moral, financial, etc. Parents should help children to grow to maturity in all these areas.

Grooming Good Citizens

There is real wisdom in these words of an anonymous poet:

If a child lives with criticism,

He learns to condemn.

If a child lives with hostility,

He learns to fight.

If a child lives with ridicule,

He learns to be shy.

If a child lives with shame,

He learns to feel guilty.

If a child lives with tolerance,
He learns to be patient.
If a child lives with encouragement,
He learns to have confidence.
If a child lives with praise
He learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness,
He learns justice.
If a child lives with security,
He learns to have faith.
If a child lives with approval,
He learns to like himself.
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship,
He learns to find love in the world.

Parents have a great — an all important — role to play in grooming their children into good citizens of this world through their word and example. On account of this responsibility parents develop really wonderful virtues, sometimes even to a heroic degree! Children, on the other hand, have the reciprocal obligation to listen to and obey their parents and to honour them. That is the way to shape a good character and to cultivate good human and Christian qualities. Parents must teach, and children must learn, to obey out of love and respect and not out of fear. Obedience out of fear is no genuine obedience but a slavish carrying out of orders. Parents must take care that every command and every correction spring from a loving solicitude for the growth and welfare of the child.

The father and the mother are the two co-principles of authority in the family. Yet we may say that nature has programmed man to be the head of the family and woman to be

the heart of the family. One without the other makes the family imperfect and, generally speaking, inadequate. The husband must give his love to the wife just as Christ gives his love to the Church. Similarly, the wife must give the husband love and respect, and put into practice his reasonable suggestions and expectations just as the Church has to obey Christ in all matters.

In exercising their authority over the children, parents must love them both naturally and supernaturally, without being harsh and over-demanding. Children in turn must submit to parental authority with reverence and love, and see in them their immediate source of existence, support and upbringing, and consider them as the natural representatives of God.

Parents should train their children, from their very early age, in proper attitudes on family life and teach them to think and act accordingly. Children should learn to practise towards their parents and among themselves such virtues as trust, understanding, humility, gentleness, love, kindness, respect, reasonable obedience and service. Gently and gradually, parents should lead their children by word and example, to go beyond the family limits to take an interest in other people, in the Church, in the neighbourhood and in the larger society.

Children and Television

During one of my visits to my sister, she told me how shocked she was when she discovered her four-year old son hiding behind the door curtain with a kitchen knife in hand. When she asked, "What are you doing with the knife here?" he replied quite simply, "I want to kill mummy!" This was the child who was so attached to his mother that he could not bear her absence even for an hour. My sister immediately recognised that the child was trying to imitate some of the violent scenes he had watched on the T.V. After that she

educated her children so well about the use of T.V. that now when a violent scene comes on, they on their own switch off the T.V.

Children watch T.V. actively, involving themselves in what they watch, and not passively. For this very reason, television can widely assist in children's intellectual, emotional, social and moral growth. They look for logical relations and narrative sequences in the stories they watch. They also connect these stories to their own life experience. It has been found that children who watch moderate amounts of T.V. a week show better school performance than those who watch little or no T.V. Therefore, it is not watching T.V. *per se* that affects the child's development, but the quality of what they watch.

As a means of communication, education and entertainment, television can be very useful. It need not be entirely harmful to the parents or to the child. However, watching violent T.V. programmes leads to increased levels of aggressive activity and undesirable behaviour patterns, while healthy programmes exemplifying positive social behaviour influence children to imbibe those qualities. If used well, T.V. can be an exciting source of learning and cultural updating for children and adults alike. Parents should control what and how long the children watch, and make sure that they view programmes that combine education and diversion. An hour or so a day of good programmes in T.V. would be in order. More time could be taken on a Sunday or on a special occasion. Parents should sit with their children during these programmes and put across to them the idea of time specific, selective and responsible T.V. watching.

On account of the strong media influence, today's children are more informed than their predecessors. The role of the family is in utilising these influences to make children better informed and better persons. That will depend on how

the medium is integrated into family rules, routines and values. Television can provide topics for discussion in the family, and facilitate conversation and value clarification. This can promote interpersonal contact within the family, while an exaggerated use of T.V. can be an escape from interaction. So I say, use T.V., of course, but use it wisely.

Need of a Congenial Atmosphere

The family is called to be a space and environment where the love of the spouses grows and is manifested, notes Roberto and Elizabeth de la Fuente. According to them the family is where the spouses give affection, understanding, support and guidance. Both need each other for their whole lives because they would not be able to grow and be happy if they were not together. Their love is the source from which children drink. Children are a very important part of a couple's life, yet they are not the reason but the result of their love.

Only in the congenial and helpful atmosphere of a good family life can the children develop their personality and character properly. In a home where there is no peace, no agreement among the members, where there is constant quarrel and confusion, where the father is a drunkard or the mother is a perpetual grouch, the children become the victims. They live in fear, insecurity and melancholy. Their abilities and talents remain uncultivated and their personality underdeveloped. On the contrary, in the bright and joyful atmosphere of a healthy family, children blossom forth and grow mature, and build up emotional balance and the spirit of cooperation. Thus they become fit to take their place in society and capable of managing their lives well.

St Paul says that children should not have to provide for their parents, but parents should provide for their children (2 Cor 12:14). It is generally presumed that a father is kind to his

children (cf. Ps 103:13). For "Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a real blessing" (Ps 127:3). Similarly, "A son honours his father" (Mal 1:6). Quoting from several passages in the Old Testament (Ex 20:12, 21:17; Deut 5:16; Lev 20:9), Jesus said approvingly: God said, "Respect your father and your mother," and "Whoever curses his father or his mother is to be put to death" (Mt 15:4). In the Book of Proverbs, we find some very wise advice, "Listen to your father; without him you would not exist. When your mother is old, show her your appreciation" (Pro 23:22). And the text goes on, "A righteous man's father has good reason to be happy. You can take pride in a wise son" (Pro 23:24).

The Bible also reminds parents of their serious duty to train their children properly, "If you have sons, educate them. Teach them self-discipline while they are young" (Sir 7:23). It gives further lessons in bringing up children. Parents who love their children will correct them and punish them when necessary. A disciplined son or daughter is the pride of the parents. If parents give good guidance to their children, even their enemies will be jealous of them. But those who spoil their children are going to be hurt. Undisciplined children will turn out to be stubborn like untamed horses. Pampered children will be a disappointment and a source of grief to their parents. Those who do not discipline their children and train them to do some work will find them an embarrassment later (cf. Sir 30:1-13).

The transmission of human life is a presupposition for the transmission of divine life. Marriage bears human children who, through baptism, become adopted children of God. Those who are born citizens of earth are meant to be also citizens of heaven.

According to St Paul, parents and children should live in a loving, happy and healthy relationship. Children should be

treated with understanding, love, care and tenderness. Parents should be devoted to their children, and a close intimacy should characterise their mutual relationship. While parents should never discourage their children through anger or harshness, children should respect and obey their parents (cf. Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:20-21). The obedience of the children is not passivity or the result of fear, for it is called for by the encouragement and benevolence of the parents (cf. Col 3:20-21). Thus, the relationship between parents and children is not one of domination and servitude, but of loving service to each other, of carrying one another's burden (cf. Gal 6:2), and thus of building up the domestic Church.

The Responsible Family

Husband and wife, being united in the sacrament of matrimony, grow together in faith, hope and love, and bear witness to the saving love of Christ before their children, others and the world.

We are living in an increasingly materialistic or hedonistic culture which does not appreciate a family with more than two children. Against this background, Christian couples freely choose to desire as many children as they can look after and educate and bring up with human dignity. Thus they exercise responsible parenthood and at the same time proclaim to the world their faith and trust in the loving and caring Father of all.

The sense of belonging to the family and the solidarity among the members of the family are important aspects of family life that are to be maintained. Children and grandchildren "are to learn first of all to do their duty to their own families and repay their debt to their parents, because this is what pleases God" (1 Tim 5:4). In fact, Paul considers "anyone who does not look after his own relations, especially if they are living with him" (1 Tim 5:8) as apostate and worse

than an unbeliever. Conversely, supporting one's family is a virtue.

Some time ago a magazine carried a cartoon in three figures. Figure 1: The father of the family is sitting on an easy chair and smoking a beedi. In front of him was his little son, sitting on the floor and watching his father. Figure 2: The father throws the butt of the beedi to the floor. The little boy is keenly looking at the smoking butt. Figure 3: The boy is sitting on his father's chair and smoking the butt of the beedi. As is the father, so is the son.

Children learn the life-style of the parents. Through their words, actions, reactions, omissions, and attitudes parents teach their children very many things, even unwittingly. The best way to teach the lesson of life is to give the right example through one's own life. Parents who love their children and desire their good, will conscientiously speak and behave and live in a good way, nay, in an exemplary way. Speaking about children, Jesus said, "See that you do not despise any of the little ones. Their angels in heaven, I tell you, are always in the presence of my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:10).

Every father and mother will do well to place their hands on their hearts and do a bit of honest introspection. Each one of them needs to ask, "Can I tell my children sincerely and authoritatively to look at me and learn from me?" How can the father who never cares to be at home in the evening, to sit with his wife and children for the daily prayer, and comes home late in the night fully drunk and crawling, tell his children to pray and to go to church? What authority over her children has a mother who is continually nagging and cursing all day? If the father and the mother recognise that children are a precious gift from God and love them and live as models for them, they can confidently and with authority tell their children, "Look at us and learn from us."

A house-maker and mother of thirteen children, Mary Ann Kuharski wrote, "Attending Sunday Mass as a family, even on days when we took turns rocking one in the vestibule, taught our children more — perhaps by osmosis — than any preaching or teaching received from us or from others. There is no more powerful example in a young child's life than seeing a mother and father on their knees. As for that 45 minutes or hour of enforced serenity, we came to see that even the youngest quickly caught on and was more than eager to imitate our prayerful actions."

Becoming Parents

It is, of course, not easy being parents in today's individualistic culture and the anti-family, anti-child climate it creates. Yet very many Christian men and women forsake other comforts and luxuries and live in everyday heroism, made up of gestures of sharing, big or small, which build up an authentic culture of life (cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 86). Jesus the Lord considers it a favour done to himself when anyone "welcomes in my name one such child as this." It is like welcoming him (cf. Mt 18:5).

By the very fact of becoming parents, spouses receive from God, together with the gift of a new life, also a new responsibility. Their parental love has to become for the children the visible sign and real experience of the love of God Himself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 14). "Part of this daily heroism," says the Pope in the same place, "is also the silent but effective and eloquent witness of all those brave mothers who devote themselves to their own family without reserve, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready to make any effort, to face any sacrifice in order to pass on to them the best of themselves."

These women are really heroic, especially because the

world around them do not give them the support they need. In fact, as the Pope says, today's cultural models promoted by the media do not encourage motherhood. In the name of progress and modernity, the values of fidelity, chastity, sacrifice, to which a host of Christian mothers have borne and continue to bear outstanding witness are presented as obsolete. And so I join the Holy Father, and invite others to join him, in saying, "We thank you, heroic mothers, for your invincible love."

Grateful Children, Grateful Parents

Grateful and loving children, too, are immensely thankful to loving and caring parents. Many parents preserve among their dearest treasures, the letters of appreciation they received from their children. Here is one such letter which Fabrizio wrote to his mother Concetta, the day before his marriage:

"Dearest Mummy,

This evening I feel very strongly the impulse to write to you... It was a lightning, a very quick flashback of images which took me back in time and space. So many moments of our life together were flowing once again most vividly. When I say "our" life, I mean mine, yours, Daddy's and my sweetest brother Michael's, all together as one. I thought, you, my Mummy are really wonderful. It is thanks to you that we have grown up like this, that we succeed in being so united even though we are so far away.

Our Dad has been so precious in making us acquire and metabolise the moral vigour and rectitude, respect for our own dignity and for the dignity of work, brotherhood in the equality of human beings as such. You know well that he did it with sympathy,

with laughter and with the intelligent irony of one who, first of all, makes fun of himself.

You, on the other hand, have followed attentively the course of our life, often not simple or easy, guiding us like the star which in the night led the shepherds to the grotto, shining above all with love. It was love in all its nuances. In your simplicity you have taught us how love is devotion, how it can become passion, how instead it is sacrifice, how it is often complicity and how one should neither abuse it nor let it be transformed into abuse. Love for what is other than you, for one who is different in colour, in language, in physique. I love you deeply for all this and I am immensely grateful to you. It is through the witness of life, of your life, that I am happy now.

Lovingly, your son Fabrizio.

This letter was published in Italian, in *Famiglia Cristiana*, 9 January 2000, at the request of Fabrizio's mother. It shows the strong spiritual bonds that are established in the family and maintained in spite of physical distances. It shows how we learn from our parents the fundamental values which guide our life, not so much from their words, but from their attitude and example. The same issue carried another letter which Carmelo and Franca wrote to their children. That too is worth quoting:

"As we want to weigh our life in the balance after twenty-five years of marriage, we become aware that, after the good God, we must thank our children, for they knew how to guide us. They have invaded us with love, especially in the most critical moments. These few words are meant to be a thanksgiving for what you have given us and will give us.

We beg you to forgive us for those times when, egoistically, we made you to suffer. Know that we shall be always close to you, also when you have a family of your own, without interfering in your married life but wishing your partners and your children well just as we wish you well."

Carmelo and Franca, while appreciating their children, also ask pardon for having made them suffer at times. That is good. However, I would not expect anyone to believe that it is necessary to satisfy the children in everything, fulfilling their every whim and fancy. Often that attitude is not a manifestation of love but a way of escaping from one's duty to educate the children. Now, returning to the letter, we see these parents rightly consider their children a gift, and thanks to them they discover the meaning of love, of their love. It is also interesting to note that while wanting to remain close to their children, they do not want to interfere in their married life. This is a wise decision because the children should be able to build up and carry on their own family in full autonomy.

Points to Ponder

1. Are you conscious that divine providence for children reaches them through their parents? What practical steps do you take to bring up your children as good Christians and good citizens?
2. Think of the little children who have nobody to care of them, and take them into your kind consideration. Do something practical to help at least one of them or visit an orphanage and offer any kind of assistance to the inmates.
4. Do you play with your children and spend time chatting with them? Are you sufficiently available to them? Do you think they feel close to you?

5. Does raising up children delight you and enrich your marriage? What blessings have they brought into your life? What new beauty and joy do you experience on account of them?



Education to Holiness: the Praying Family



We all believe that God created every human being to know Him, love Him, to serve Him and to be happy with Him forever. How does a married couple do that? What nourishes conjugal spirituality?

Conjugal spirituality is born of faith, it lives in hope and grows and expresses itself in charity. These virtues which form the foundation of all Christian spirituality are welcomed by the family as a gift of the Spirit and lived in the peculiar atmosphere of the family.

God has deeply transformed humanity by becoming a human being in Jesus Christ. The God who created us in His own image and likeness, configured us with Christ in our Baptism. The human race has been so transformed that we meet God and touch Him in and through one another. This is all the more true of the relationship between husband and

wife whose union is sanctified by sacramental grace. They are to walk hand in hand in the way of sanctity and come to God together. They are to take their children also to God by educating them in holiness. They will do so if theirs is a praying family where the right relationship with God is maintained in daily life.

It is therefore the duty of parents to teach their children, little by little, the beauty and excellence of knowing, loving and serving God. As children learn the rudiments of faith from their parents, the latter ought to share the faith with their children in a personal and experiential manner. In a letter written in 1868, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara tells parents about this duty of theirs towards their children. "Teach them to call on Jesus, Mary and Joseph, as soon as they are grown up enough. Show them their pictures, make them kiss them and teach them to honour and love them. Teach them the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, the *Angelus* and the other small prayers. How commendable it is to nourish the souls of your children with these at the same time as you bring them up in the physical plane."

Growing in Holiness

Faith develops into trust and into faithfulness to God and one another. Hope becomes a commitment to building up of the kingdom of heaven by promoting justice through the presence and witness of the family. Charity spreads among the brethren and the community as a gift received from the Holy Spirit. The Word of God nourishes faith. Repentance and conversion strengthen hope. The experience of charity enables us to understand the deep sense of the Eucharist and makes it truly a thanksgiving.

The Word of God, repentance and the Eucharist are the framework of conjugal and family prayer. This spirit of family prayer acquires new vigour and freshness in moments like retreats, gatherings for reflection, review of life, etc. In the regular occasions of daily life like meals, Sundays, joyful events like birth, baptism, marriage, painful events like loss of employment or property, illness and death it receives the stimulus to make present in the midst of the community Jesus Christ who lives, listens and forgives.

The Word of God

In the Word of God the Christian family finds clarity. It confronts its life and choices with the Word. In response to the Word the family works out its conversion and begins anew its daily pilgrimage. Thus the Word of God builds up the little domestic Church that the Christian family is.

This can happen through an authentic and meditative listening to the Word proclaimed in the liturgy, especially of Sunday. It can happen also through the reading of the Word at home in accordance with the liturgical seasons or as suggested by occasions like birthdays and anniversaries. Reflection on the Word, read or listened to, ushers into the family a common attitude of thanksgiving, of prayer, of humility towards God, of trust in divine mercy, of hope in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Repentance

The Word of God enables the family and its individual members to recognise themselves as sinners, and introduces them to repentance and to trusting in the Father's love. In this love they learn to reconcile the struggles and the joys of life. In the field of conjugal spirituality repentance can acquire a

great communitarian significance, beyond the privatisation of the spiritual introspection.

The spouses enter the communitarian penitential celebration as a couple. Like others they carry their personal and social sins. Besides, they also bring with them their failures especially as couple and as family. They are disposed to taste together the joys of forgiveness and return to the Father's household. Knowing that their personal sins affect their life as a couple, the spouses ask pardon from others and from each other. Thus the exchange of peace in the Eucharistic celebration in which the spouses participate together assumes a particular significance as a sign of conversion and reconciliation.

The Eucharist

The Holy Eucharist is the central point and mainstay of every form of Christian spirituality. The Eucharist builds up Christian marriage in its historic, concrete, dynamic dimensions. In the Body of Christ that is broken, in the Blood of Christ that is poured out they participate in each other's irrevocable self-gift and together make their common gift to one another. They reconfirm in Christ their existence as a couple, and they restore in Christ all the sacred and secular values that make up the fabric of married life.

Jesus in the Eucharist is "God with us" (Mt 1:23), continuously giving himself for the salvation of the world. In the Eucharist, the couple welcomes the appeal to walk towards an ever more complete participation in the life of one another and to become an ever clearer sign of the love and union between Christ and the Church. In this sense, the married state itself becomes in some way a "eucharist", a perennial and living memorial of the faithful and sacrificial love of Christ for the human race.

The Eucharist builds up not only conjugal communion but also family communion. Within the Church it shapes the domestic Church. The various moments of household life, of living together, can become an extension and a proclamation of the celebration, of the feast, of meeting with the brethren together, with whom the Eucharistic Lord calls the couple. The fruitful relation between the Eucharist and family spirituality is nourished in a special way by the experience of Eucharistic celebration in families. Such celebration helps families to experience the sense and the value of being themselves little communities of the Church.

Peace and Justice

Peace is a constant aspiration of conjugal and family life. This yearning is not for the absence of contrasts which are inevitable at the human level. It is rather for the composition of diversities in the deep communion of persons. This peace is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is also the fruit of compassion, of an interior attitude of humility which enables us to understand each one as limited, a sinner and in need of pardon from God and neighbour. In virtue of this attitude, the members of the family forgive one another, knowing that God forgives our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Contemporary humans are very keen on the ideal of justice. In the context of marriage and family, there is a great possibility of living justice at the level of spirituality. More than anything else, justice is a deep and convinced attitude of respect for the diversity of persons. This respect springs from the awareness that God is the source and richness of every diversity. From this sense of justice derives a concrete commitment to ensure an equitable division of tasks and duties in a variety of services and adjustability of roles. This will ensure that in the life of the couple there will never be any

kind of oppression of one by the other or any prolonged conflict. Rather, they will solve and settle their differences in the harmony born of mutual respect and love. Justice is an indispensable guide to family life and an important point of reference in conjugal and parental love.

However, persecutions and sufferings are not total strangers in the family. There is a kind of persecution which many people experience in some measure, that of lack of understanding, and at times even that of contempt and calumny. Suspicion, false accusation, mistrust and infidelity are painful forms of persecution. Physical violence, lack of concern for the welfare of the other members of the family, non-cooperation, wastefulness, privatisation of common property and many similar things amount to gross or subtle forms of persecution. No Christian, and no couple, can be faithful to Christ and practise these evils at the same time. When they are themselves victims of such persecution, they can derive strength, comfort and hope from the universal appeal of the beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10).

Service to the World

The spirituality of Christian families, the following of Christ in their particular state of life, is possible if they are vitally rooted in the Church and have a clear ecclesial vision. It is in the Church that the Christian family continually recomposes its own identity. It is from the mission of the Church that the Christian family derives its particular ministry. This is a lay ministry, and not technically "ordained ministry". Yet, it is always fruitful as it is a response to God's constant appeal to the couple to grow in grace and to give themselves generously in service to others.

The married couple has a ministry as sign, too. Together, the spouses are a sign of love, of unity, of faithfulness with reference to the great Biblical themes of love and marriage. They have also a ministry of life which they exercise through bearing and rearing children, through education, faith-formation, adoption, hospitality and support. Besides, they have a ministry of service to the world in schools, neighbourhood, parents' unions, etc., in helping and preparing the engaged for marriage, teaching catechism to children, offering support to couples in difficulties, etc.

Formation for married life is essential. One has to undergo the process of learning the skills and knowledge, attitudes and values that are required for building up a happy family life. Marriage being a life-long partnership, requires preparation, and training in handling properly the problems and responsibilities it brings. Marriage is a true vocation and mission for life. It is wise to begin the remote preparation of the person for it right in his or her childhood. As children grow up, an in-depth catechesis should equip them to celebrate and live the Sacrament of Matrimony and to live it with the best of moral and spiritual dispositions (*cf. Familiaris Consortio*, 66).

Newly wed couples and those preparing for marriage need to be introduced to the sacredness of marriage, to the theology of this sacrament, and guided into conjugal spirituality so that they know fully well the obligations of married life. They should be assisted in welcoming new life into the family and in bringing up their children as good Christians. Older couples too need renewal programmes to update themselves and to enrich their family life.

There is need to recover the deep meaning of the educative ministry of Christian family for the integral development of persons, for their promotion, and for offering them the

atmosphere and the means to grow and mature in every way as free and responsible children of God. The words of Jesus are clear. "A person is born physically of human parents, but he is born spiritually of the Spirit" (Jn 3:6). Christian parents have an inescapable responsibility to assist their children in their spiritual birth and growth.

This growth involves decreasing one's egoism and selfishness and increasing in charity. Therefore the educative service is not only what the parents do for their offspring in the early years of development, but also the mutual and all-embracing commitment of all members of the family to support and promote the growth of one another till they "become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature" (Eph 4:13). This is a specific charism of parents; others can exercise it only imperfectly.

The missionary dimension becomes a constant reference point of family life lived in its fullness, in obedience to the Father, in following Christ, in faithfulness to the Spirit. The dimensions of the Christian mission — to go, to make disciples for Christ, to baptise and to teach obedience to Christ (cf. Mt 18:19) — are tasks entrusted to the whole Church and not only to the hierarchy. Naturally, they assume an important role in conjugal and family spirituality.

It is helpful, in this connection, to remember the words of John Paul II, "Parents are the first and most important educators of their own children. They also possess a fundamental competence in this area: they are educators because they are parents. They share their educational mission with other individuals or institutions such as the Church and the State... all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities in the name of the parents, with their consent, and to a certain degree, with their authorisation" (*Letter to Families*, No.16).

A Notable Example

Angela and Henri Rebello are a senior couple whom I know. Here is what Henri wrote to me. It is the story of a family who went out of its way to serve the Christian community.

"We were married in 1975 and settled in Borivli East (a suburb of Mumbai). I was interested in meeting people and Angela gave me full support in this and often joined me, too. During our stay in Borivli, we periodically visited a hundred families, including the poor and the rich.

"In 1975, during my visits to fellow Christians, I tried my best to understand them and console many in their sorrows. On those visits I observed that most of the people did not go to church regularly. I prayed for wisdom to find a solution and to unite the people. Many of us like-minded people joined together and approached the parish priest for help. He was kind enough to recommend a priest from St Francis monastery, Borivli, and so every Sunday morning we had community Mass in the Nancy Colony.

"This brought in a great change in the families, and they were happy. They cooperated and the Lord showered blessings on the community. The Sisters of the Society of the Helpers of Mary helped and guided them. Most of the members who took initiative to build up the community were blessed by God, and in course of time they moved out of Borivli. I too shifted to Kalina (another suburb of Mumbai). God sent new people to strengthen the community of Borivli, and today it has developed into Christ the King parish.

"In the meantime Angela and myself were blessed with two sons. After coming to Kalina, we were busy with the studies of our children. To make both ends meet, Angela was compelled to go to work. Every day both of us would spend some time in personal prayer. As our children grew up, and

with a reliable house maid at her side, in 1984 Angela encouraged me to go into community service. Along with a few friends I visited about 200 families periodically. Family prayer and personal prayer helped to build up the community. We all experienced that the power of prayer is great. On November 1, 1987, I, though unworthy, was chosen to be among the ten lay ministers commissioned to bring communion to the sick.

"I offer myself to the Lord Jesus in my daily prayers. I am very grateful to him for giving me a fitting life-partner who continues to be my support. My appointment as a Eucharistic minister strengthened my faith and also influenced the community to a certain extent. To serve the Lord through communities continues to be my ardent desire."

If only more couples would follow the example of the Rebello family!

The Family and Vocations

Helping the children to choose their vocation and preparing them to assume the state of life fitting for each one are an important part of education. Preparing for marriage, to establish their own families and to live as a couple are basically the task of the family.

Good fruits come from good trees. Once the question was asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" for Nazareth was considered a place not good enough to produce anything worthwhile. This reminds me of an elderly lady who expressed great wonder when she came to know that I lost my mother when I was just twelve years old. For her it was almost incredible that without the loving care and gentle guidance of the mother, any youth could respond to God's call to the religious life.

A tree bends this way or that according to the influences acting upon it. So also a person's mentality and inclination bear the mark of the training he has had. The call comes from God, and the response comes from the individual. Yet, only those who are disposed for it hear the call, and only those who are prepared answer it. It is like the seed sown; the harvest varies from soil to soil.

As the family is the community of initial and basic formation, it is there that the child acquires the first knowledge of the faith, of prayer and the spirit of dedication and service. The seeds of vocation are planted in the minds and hearts of children, in very many cases, already in their early childhood.

Preparing the ground to receive God's call is mainly the task of the parents. If they are convinced of their religion, they will carry the same conviction to their children. If they are devout, they will inspire devotion, too. Thus the wind is kept blowing. As a rule, the tree falls in the direction of the wind, as a mother who wanted her son to come with me to the religious life said to me. This mother brings to mind the picture of St Monica praying for the conversion of her son Augustine who later became a great saint.

Christ is asking for youthful hands and youthful hearts. Some offer themselves as carriers of Christ's good news because they realise the need for messengers to spread the Gospel of salvation. They hear the challenge, "Whom shall we send? And who will be our messenger?" and bravely answer, "Here I am, send me!" (Is 6:8). When the fire of love is kindled in their youthful hearts, they offer it exclusively to the Lord.

Out of love for God, parents should be willing to let their best and dearest children who so desire, to be dedicated to God in a special way, just as God loves us so much as to give

His only Son (Jn 3:16). We do, rarely though, come across parents who think it a nice way of getting rid of their problem teens to send them to seminary. Are they not imitating Cain who offered the worst produce to God? Let them rather imitate Abel who chose the best lamb to offer as a pleasing sacrifice to God (cf. Gen 4:1-6). They can do so by providing at home an atmosphere in which vocations can grow, by instilling in their children a desire for vocation, and by encouraging them to respond positively to Christ who calls, "Follow me" (Mk 2:14).

Moreover, children of proper age should find their parents or guardians available for, and helpful in, the task of determining their vocation. Unfortunately there are many parents who, in their misdirected solicitude, their headstrong love for their children, frustrate their children's vocation. But such an important issue as this should be viewed calmly, with clear-eyed vision and in the light of Christ's call to perfection (Mt 5:48).

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Pro 22:6). Parents need to be familiar with Christian doctrine, and demonstrate their faith in their daily Christian living, in attending divine services, in receiving the sacraments, in daily prayers and in charity. Blessed is the home where Christian doctrine is taught and loved, because there faith shall be living and active. Vocations will flourish in such congenial surroundings. A good fruit can come only from a good tree.

Mr Lawrence D'Souza, a 71 year old friend of mine writes about his childhood experience in the family,

"My father worked hard to bring up his six children, and hard work kept him healthy and agile. To supplement his income he worked part time for his elder brother and also in his friend's bakery as an

accountant. He was a founder member of the Lourdes Union, a dramatic society. He was a good actor and musician. At Christmas time he would make a beautiful crib for us and lead the Christmas carols after the Rosary. So also during Lent we as family used to sing Lenten hymns, especially the lamentations of Prophet Jeremiah. My father was a member of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Sorrows, and for 35 years he took part as Joseph of Arimathea in the Passion play on Good Friday and brought down Our Lord's body from the Cross. We children used to be very proud of him. His love for home and family surpassed all his other interests.

My mother encouraged me to join the altar boys' sodality at a very young age. Every morning she would take me to church for Mass. After Mass we both would kneel at the altar of Our lady of Lourdes and say the three Hail Mary's. When we gathered in the evening, mother would lead us in praying the Rosary and the night prayers. She had a charitable disposition and was a friend of the poor and the sick. She looked after three elderly gentlemen in our home in their last days, and educated a young man to priesthood. The beautiful lessons my late parents taught me by their example still remain with me."

The educational ministry of parents is so important and so noble that St Thomas Aquinas compares it with the ministry of priests, "Some only propagate and guard spiritual life by a spiritual ministry. This is the role of the Sacrament of Orders. Others do this for both corporal and spiritual life, and this is brought about by the Sacrament of Matrimony by which a man and a woman join in order to beget offspring and bring them up to worship God" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 58).

The Praying Family

Prayer makes Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour, present among us and keeps us in touch with him. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20). May he dwell in every human family and enable every family to remain in his love. Through his presence in the small families of parents and children, may he dwell in the great family of the human race, the family of nations.

As Pope John Paul II says, "Prayer increases the strength and spiritual unity of the family, helping the family to partake of God's own strength. In the solemn nuptial blessing during the Rite of Marriage, the celebrant calls upon the Lord in these words: 'Pour out upon them the grace of the Holy Spirit so that by Your love poured into their hearts they will remain faithful in the marriage covenant.' This visitation of the Holy Spirit gives rise to the inner strength of families, as well as the power capable of uniting them in love and truth (*Letter to Families*, 1994, No 4).

In prayer, God's remembrance of us and our remembrance of Him are made manifest. In the same way the prayer of the family as a community can become the place of common and mutual remembrance. The family is in fact a community of generations. In prayer, everyone should be present: the living and those who are dead, and also those yet to come into the world. Families should pray for all the members in view of what the family is for each member and what each member is for the family. Prayer strengthens the good of the family and renews it (cf. *Ibid.* No 10).

Family life is at the same time a call from God and a response to His call. Family prayer keeps it a filial and faithful response to Him. As John Paul II says, joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, births and the birthday

celebrations, wedding anniversaries of the parents, departures, separation and home-comings, important and far-reaching decisions, the deaths of those who are dear, etc. — all of these mark God's loving intervention in the family's history. They are occasions for thanksgiving, petition and trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of the Father in heaven (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 59).

It is the responsibility of parents and elders to train children from the earliest years to think of God, to honour Him and to love their neighbour. Pope Paul VI appeals to parents, "Mothers, do you teach your children the Christian prayers? Do you prepare them, in conjunction with the priests, for the sacraments that they receive when they are young: Confession, Communion, and Confirmation? Do you encourage them when they are sick to think of the suffering Christ, to invoke the help of the Blessed Virgin and the saints? Do you say the family Rosary together? And you, fathers, do you pray with your children, with the whole domestic community, at least sometimes? Your example of honesty in thought and action, joined to some common prayer, is a lesson for life, an act of worship of singular value" (General Audience, 11 August 1976).

The same Pope also recommends strongly the recitation of the family Rosary as one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to recite. He wishes that the Rosary be a frequent and favoured prayer of the family (cf. *Marialis Cultus*, 52, 54).

Family prayer has its own characteristics, as John Paul II notes. It is prayer offered in common, husband and wife together, parents and children together. As Mother Teresa of Kolkata and other notable persons used to say, "The family that prays together, stays together." Communion in prayer springs from and supports the communion established by the

sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony. The words of Jesus apply to Christian family in a special way, "Whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19).

Points to Ponder

1. How can you strike a balance between spiritual life and the various daily activities?
2. Think and plan what you can do to live Christian faith more fully as a family.
3. Is your prayer-life satisfactory? Do you inculcate the spirit of faith and prayer in your children?
4. Is growing in holiness important for you and your family? Do you believe God calls you to holiness?
5. If somebody comes to your home asking for help, why not ask your children to hand over some alms or encourage them to extend a helping hand to that person? That would be a good training in charity.

Bear One Another's Burdens



Sali and Joe are a middle aged couple. One day I was talking with them about this book that I was working on. They shared their experience with me in the form of a story.

One night Yama, the god of death, sent his messenger to a family with the order to take either the husband or the wife to hell. Yama's messenger met the man first and announced his mission. The man was terribly upset, and began weeping and imploring for mercy, "Please do not take me; I am needed here to look after my wife and children, I do not want to go to hell." So the messenger went to the woman and told her the purpose of his visit. She said, "Please do not take away my husband. Spare him and take me instead." Yama's messenger was touched by the attitude of the good hearted lady and did not want to take her to hell. So he went back to the man. The man began weeping and crying all the more for mercy.

Finally the agent of death returned to the woman and announced his decision to take her away to hell. The lady

was not at all upset. She said, "Thank you for sparing my husband." She seemed happy. So Yama's messenger asked her, "Why are you so happy to go to hell?" She replied, "My husband has been living with me for many years. He has no experience of hell; he has only experienced heaven. But I have the experience of living with him all these years. I can manage to live also in hell!"

Well, what do we see in this story? The husband has been making life hell for the wife. Yet he loves her and does not want to abandon her and the children. The wife, on the other hand, has suffered much from the husband, but still loves him and does not want to let him go to suffer in hell. Instead, she is willing to go to the land of suffering. Conclusion: in spite of their difficulties and differences, they love each other, for love is patient and kind; it is not selfish or irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail (cf. 1 Cor 13:4-7).

In family life endurance and patience are extremely important. For the good of the loving and beloved partner, for the sake of the dear children and for one's own benefit, each of the spouses has to practise love, patience and kindness. Everyone is bound to make concessions and compromises in order to provide the family with a collective personality while at the same time respecting the individuality and personality of each member. The spouses especially should not impose their own ideas and opinions on each other but make plans and programmes together as a joint activity.

When there arises a difference of opinion, the husband and the wife need to have the good will to sit together and discuss the matter without bitterness or rivalry, and arrive at a mutually acceptable solution. If that attempt fails, then it is better that one party shows generosity in leaving the matter to the decision of the other without ever pointing the accusing

finger at the other or raking up a controversy. Here again St Paul points the way, "Don't do anything from selfish ambition or a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves. And look out for one another's interests, not just for your own" (Phil 2:3-4). What better counsel can couples find?

A house wife, married for more than thirty years, wrote to me, "When difficulties come, if we think about how many people there are who suffer much more than we, our difficulties will look small. When we remember the countless blessings we have received, our troubles will appear insignificant. It is necessary to have a positive mentality in everything. When we recognise that for anyone on earth, life is a mixture of joys and sorrows, we feel consoled."

Appreciate Rather than Criticise

Lawrence, an elderly father of a family shared with me how his wife helped him to become more religious minded. He says, "Coming to Bombay for employment, sad to say, I forgot all my good formation and became only a Sunday Catholic till 1960 when I met my future wife. Every day, at her initiative, we would recite together the Rosary and the night prayers. She joined the ladies' Sodality in Bandra and encouraged me to join the men's Sodality in St Andrew's parish."

He goes on, "Within six months, I was elected secretary of the Sodality. I realised how unworthy I was compared to other sodalists who were more educated and held higher positions in their offices. I understood that Mother Mary had chosen me for a purpose. Thereafter I was made prefect seven times and had the privilege of being appointed the first lay man to do the reading at the midnight Mass on Christmas, 1967. Ever since, I have been reading at Mass every Sunday till I left Bandra." It was marriage that led this man closer to

God and to society. He deeply appreciates the role of his wife in his transformation.

Wherever two or more persons live together, differences and frictions are bound to occur. The family is no exception to this. If the family has to go forward in peace, love, unity and joy, each member must be willing to forgive others and to seek forgiveness for themselves. There should be no coldness or indifference within a family. If any member has hurt another by word or deed or attitude, he or she must be willing to confess the fault and say "sorry" to the aggrieved person. In sincerity and simplicity just ask pardon. The desire for reconciliation should be there on both sides. Keeping account of offences received, nurturing hurt feelings and seeking revenge will never solve a problem, but only make it worse. When we desire others to forgive us our sins, we should be willing to forgive those who sin against us.

Spouses have to be a help rather than a hindrance to each other. When necessary, correct, of course, but do so without criticising or condemning. Be generous in appreciation and sparing in pointing out defects. Remember, the husband or the wife needs and expects the maximum appreciation from each other. The husband should express appreciation for what the wife does — maintaining the house clean, preparing tasty food, planning the menu, caring for the children, and a thousand other things. When a wife offers her husband the food she has prepared lovingly and carefully for him, if the only thing he says is "too much salt", "no sugar in this", "not cooked enough", "this has got burnt", she can be badly hurt and discouraged. Why not rather look at the brighter side, see what is positive and encourage what is good and praiseworthy? Three compliments for one criticism is a good proportion.

Practise Forgiveness

Gary Chapman narrates an experience of his:

“One warm August day several years ago, my wife-to-be and I made a visit to the minister who was to perform our wedding ceremony. We ate dinner under an aged oak tree, and he presented this bit of advice, which I have never forgotten. ‘When you are angry, take turns talking.’ He went on to explain that I should take three or five minutes to state my ideas on the issue while my wife remained silent (no butting is allowed). Then she should be given three to five minutes to state her understanding of the issue. This process could continue as long as necessary.

“On that warm August day, I could not imagine that I would ever need to use such strategy with the perfect wife God had given me. Why should I ever get that angry at her? That question was soon to be answered, and I was to become proficient at taking turns. I have suggested the same to hundreds of couples since. Taking turns does not solve the problem, but it does allay the heat so that you can get at the problem” (from *Toward a Growing Marriage* by G. Chapman).

St Paul urges all of us, “Be always humble, gentle and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another” (Eph 4:2). The husband and the wife should be able to tell each other, “Whatever happens, I am there in your life.” God has entrusted them to each other. Therefore they should take care to eliminate anything that will create division between them. It is best never to close the day without clearing the little, inevitable frictions and misunderstandings. Marriage is a daily exercise of forgiveness, requested and granted. Pardon and reconciliation depend very much on dialogue. Genuine dialogue passes through the ability to listen with intelligence and with one’s heart. The ideal would be for the husband and

the wife to become an open book to each other. What they decide and do should be for their common good, and not at the cost of letting down anyone.

Forgiveness does not cover up the evil, it takes away the evil. When conjugal harmony is lost, what can be done? It is necessary then to overcome pride which blocks the first step. One has to make an accurate self-examination to recognise one's own errors and failures, and not only those of one's spouse. One should also be humble enough to say, "I am sorry. Let us start again."

Dr Rani Raote, an experienced psychotherapist practising in Mumbai, notes that a husband can listen lovingly and patiently to his wife's anger about her problems at work, helping till she finally handles it on her own. Her anger, frustration and pain do not damage their relationship. Rather, this sharing strengthens the bond between them.

However, Raote points out that if his wife expresses her anger for some behaviour of his towards her, the interaction changes immediately. It is hard for him to be patient because his own insecurities are evoked, and his natural reaction is to defend himself. He feels hurt, and tries to justify himself. This situation can damage their relationship. To maintain a deep, loving relationship, it is vital to learn how to deal with the pain of the spouse.

It is a good idea, says Raote, to look within ourselves and to face what we find difficult to accept. Ask whether you are insensitive, selfish and uncaring to have caused pain to your spouse. The self-image can be shaken, but one must find the courage to deal with the pain.

Forgiveness is essential to a happy married life. As Jean Vanier points out, "Forgiveness is the love offered to another who is wounded, vulnerable, fearful and who has broken the

unity. Forgiveness implies the understanding that all the blockages, all the aggressive acts came, in great measure, from inner sufferings, anguish and fears. Forgiveness is the welcome of the other just as he or she is, with all the flaws, all the past, all the weaknesses and all the sin. Forgiveness signifies and acknowledges the covenant with another."

Think and Act in Terms of We

Writing to the Christians in Galatia, St Paul tells them something very beautiful, "Help to carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). If this applies to all Christians, it applies with greater force to married couples. They are to be one in all things including sufferings and difficulties, and in carrying all kinds of burdens in life. They should help and support each other willingly and happily, for "God loves the one who gives gladly" (2 Cor 9:7).

As St Paul says elsewhere, God helps us in all our troubles enabling us to help others in their troubles (cf. 2 Cor 1:4). How much more, then, should husband and wife help and support each other! God has united them; let no one, neither the husband nor the wife, separate them in any way. They are to be one. Neither of them should consider the partner as "the other". They should always think and act in terms of "we" and not in terms of "he/she and I".

The Book of Proverbs says, a capable wife is hard to find, but is worth more than jewels! She does good to her husband, and he can put his confidence in her. She works hard, looks after the home and takes care of all the needs of the family. In her care the family prospers, and from what she produces, she generously gives to the poor. Her children show their appreciation, and her husband praises her. He says, "many women are good wives, but you are the best of them all." Her

credit must be recognised, and she deserves the respect of everyone (cf. Pro 31:10-31).

In marriage the "I" and the "you" merge into "we". That is to say, marriage is thinking and acting as one, not as individuals. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery says, "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction." Married life is not just saying sweet nothings to each other, but a joint programme of life.

Silvia was married to John (not real names) about ten years ago. She is a working lady, doing both office work and attending to household work. Whatever money she earns, she handles herself. She has not revealed to her husband how much she earns, but takes care of some of the household needs which the husband does not notice.

One day when he did not have the money for a very important need of the family, John asked her for money. She did not give it, saying there was no money with her. So he went to the house of a relative to borrow money, but came back empty handed. When she came to know this she gave him the required amount. Their seven-year old daughter who was watching this asked Silvia, "Mummy, why did you keep your money and send daddy to borrow from that house?" Now Silvia says she was much disturbed by the child's question. Yet she asks, "Was not what I did right? Do I not have the right to keep and spend what I earn?"

This lady has forgotten that the family and the home are a joint responsibility of husband and wife. The pooling together of interests, energies, efforts and resources is necessary for a good family life. If each one thinks, "This is mine," then there is no real communion of life. Such individualism is unfaithfulness to the very purpose of marriage. Does not St Paul teach that the husband and the wife are no more two but

one (cf. Eph 5:31)? The grace of the sacrament they received on the day of their wedding was also meant for their oneness. That day they touched the Bible in front of the assembly and promised to God to live in unity of mind and heart with the partner always and in all circumstances.

Silvia seems to be a hard-working lady, daily travelling to office and back, taking care of office work as well as household chores. Presumably she takes good care of the children, too. Seemingly she does not waste her earnings on luxury and pomp, but tries to save it. This style of her life has to be appreciated.

However, Silvia has obviously failed to keep fully the promise she made to God, the promise to live in oneness with her husband. Unfortunately, many in married life today do not value the promise they made during the wedding ceremony. Instead, there is an overemphasis on personal freedom and individual decision. They do not view marriage in the light of God's plan. They live together, have children, bring them up, earn money, spend it for a cosy and luxurious life. Apparently that is all about their marriage.

These people forget that marriage is meant to be a communion of life. On account of their marriage promises and the grace of the sacrament, the husband and the wife should not be divided and separated in anything. With marriage, their two lives merge into one, their two stories merge into one. There are no more two lives or two stories but one.

In his book *Hide or Seek*, Dr James Dobson expresses this idea as follows: "Life has been tough and you've had your share of suffering. To this point, you've faced your problems without much human support and there have been times when your despiration has been overwhelming. Let me, now, share that burden. From this moment forward, I am interested

in you as a person; you deserve and shall have my respect. As best as possible, I want you to quit worrying about your troubles. Instead, confide them to me. Our concentration will be on the present and the future, and together we will seek appropriate solutions."

Caring and Sharing

It is through caring and sharing in the family that each member's burden of life is lightened. The husband and the wife should openly share with each other all things — joys, sorrows, difficulties, needs, ideas, projects, plans, desires, hopes, etc. Only when they take decisions jointly and work together, will they be able to put into practice their promise of living together in unity of mind and heart. Whatever gift is received at the time of marriage in terms of gold, money, movable and immovable property, etc., and whatever is earned after marriage, are to be taken as the common wealth of the family. To take them as private possession of the individual is to be out of tune with the nature of marriage and God's plan for it.

The husband and the wife are no more two but one, financially, too. Money, then, is not one's private concern; it is common. Therefore, in the case of Silvia (see above), she has a serious duty to inform her husband clearly how much she earns from her job. They should plan together and spend their money for genuine needs of the home.

In this context it is worth noting the patience, tolerance and gentleness of John. Obviously he suffered on account of Silvia's attitude and behaviour, but suffered silently, without fighting for his right to information and money. This is admirable.

Often the story we hear is the opposite of this. In many cases, even though the wife may work hard, earn and spare,

it is the husband who takes the money, decides how to use it and spends as he chooses. I know one case in which the wife sold one of the pigs she had grown, in order to have money to buy some kitchen utensils. Knowing this, the husband refused to pay the school fees for the son, thereby forcing the wife to pay it and preventing her from buying the utensils she needed for the kitchen! This too is very unjust and unbecoming of a loving and understanding couple.

In Silvia's story, the child shows more understanding than the mother. The girl understood her father's mental anguish whereas the wife who was to be a partner and support to the husband failed to do so. The child recognised that the mother's behaviour was not right. Hopefully, when she becomes wife and mother, she will not follow the example of her mother. The mother in this story needs to correct her attitude and give her children the example of love and unity in the family. She should recognise the gravity of her mistake and with sincerity and simplicity talk lovingly with her husband and ask his pardon for her failure. That will restore joy, peace and unity in their family.

Love Bears All Things

A young lady called Massi wrote a moving letter to her parents on the occasion of their wedding anniversary. In a few words it refers to the entire life of her parents with its difficulties, caused also by the differences of character, and with its pains and joys. All this has been amalgamated by love, by remaining united and by having struggled together, supported by faith. This has been a great example and inspiration for the children. Here is Massi's letter:

"My dear Mummy, my dear daddy, thank you.

Thank you for being together still. Thank you for having fought together against the adversities of life. Thank you for having overcome the barriers of your individual characters to let yourselves be modelled by your love for each other. Thank you for having staked your life on your union. Thank you for having thought that the ugly moments pass and make you understand something, make you grow, together. Thank you for having made us share in your union by giving us the gift of life.

Remember that every moment that you live together, be it a beautiful or an ugly moment, we children breathe in; we make it enter into our heart and into our memory... Thank you for having shown us in faith a certainty, a power to walk together. Thank you for having made us see in you a miracle of love against every logic... so different, yet so united. Two hearts in one.

Your loving Massi."

How Massi's parents bear each other's burdens so lovingly, so wonderfully! Their example makes deep gratitude spring up in their daughter's heart and traces a way for her to proceed in her own future days.

Yes. Man and woman are made interdependent. They are to relate to each other and live a social life. The Creator said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen 2:18). Helper here is not merely servant or assistant, but someone who helps in personal matters in an intimate way, someone who can make up for man's shortcomings, someone whom he needs in order to be complete. The family springs from the husband-wife relationship. From relationship between families, society takes shape.

If the spouses do not offer support to each other, it is really difficult to go forward in family life. One housewife says, they have to become "the walking stick" of each other. Every member of the family is called to become "a shade and a support" for every other member, says she from the wisdom of her experience. The husband should support the wife and vice versa. Similarly, parents should support the children and vice versa. Within the well-knit family community, everyone needs everyone else.

In this context it is necessary to be aware that different members have different mental frames and different needs to be fulfilled. One mother observes quite correctly that it is easier to understand the physical and material needs rather than psychological and emotional needs. The family will proceed in the path planned by God when each one sincerely and openly shares with others his or her thoughts, ideas and difficulties whether at one's work place or at home. Thus families receive support, encouragement and guidance not only from their own members but also from society.

Family life has its own troubles and pains; yet it has its own joys and comforts, too. Life goes on whether we reflect on it or not, but it does make sense to get in touch with what we are experiencing and how we are living. Here begins self-improvement.

Points to Ponder

1. How do you take decisions in your family? Is yours the best way, or is there need to change your method? How can you achieve greater unity in decision-making?
2. Have you revealed your assets and liabilities to your spouse? If not, won't you do it soon?

3. Is your life-partner happy? Is it a delight or a torture for him or her to be committed for all life to you?
4. When there is a problem in the family, do you ignore it, neglect it, handle it wisely, seek help if needed or sink into despair and pessimism?
5. In your family do you ask pardon from one another and grant pardon to one another? If not, why not introduce this beautiful practice?

Take a Positive Approach to Sexuality



Many years ago when I used to be the youth counsellor of *The Teenager* magazine, I received a letter from a college lecturer who wrote about her colleague, aged 30 years. My correspondent stated that her friend was angry with God for creating sex. She was angry because if she were married, her husband would come to her and demand his rights. He would do to her "what a bull would do to a cow". This, in her view, was very ugly and degrading. She could not accept such a thing. She was horrified by the thought. She had such a strong aversion to sex, and therefore to marriage, that she "hated God" for making human beings male and female. Therefore she was now thinking of becoming a nun in a convent.

I replied, saying in substance that sexuality is good; it is God's gift. If our parents did not accept that gift, we would never have seen the light of day. One does not become a nun

or a religious because one thinks marriage and sex are bad. It is true, humans have misused, abused and exploited sex, yet, we should not forget that it was not any human being but God who originated the idea of sex. God most holy, in Whom there can be no sin, made us male and female. Sex, therefore, is wholesome and good. Hatred of sex is no motive for religious life. I offer to God not what I despise but what I consider precious, like Abel who offered his best sheep in sacrifice to God, and not like Cain who offered defective farm products. We read in the Bible that God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but rejected Cain's.

I appreciate my sexuality and I am happy with it. Therefore I make it a sacrifice to God whom I love, and become a religious. This is my love-offering to God, not my flight from marriage. The right motive for doing this is intense love for God, not its opposite. One who hates God, for whatever reason, is not at all fit to become a religious, a consecrated celibate. So, if the lady did not accept her own sexuality, and even hated God, then she should forget about becoming a nun rather than become a counterfeit nun. There can be no true monastic life without God, just as there can be no true family life without God.

Traditional spirituality has tried to develop without taking sexuality as part of it. However, today it is difficult to admit a valid spiritual experience which does not include a positive approach to sexuality. Here we do not intend to discuss the sexuality of the infant, adolescent, celibate or virgin, but only to discuss the beauty and goodness of sex in married life, and its role in the sanctification of the couple.

Sexuality is the natural route by which love influences and affects the self. Depending on the kind of love, it can awaken one's human potentialities or smother them. The whole person becomes humanised and his or her sexuality becomes

enlightened by the experience of love that he or she has received. All one's sexual life, and the genital aspect of it, should be lived within the context of self-giving.

"Surely the joys and fruitfulness of married sexuality must include sexual pleasure as a primary gift of God to human-kind. Loving sexual union is the embodiment of the loving bond between husband and wife and increases a couple's love. What greater act of love of another can there be than the unity resulting from the passionate giving and receiving of sexual love?" says Sidney Callahan (*A Retreat with Mary of Magdela and Augustine*, Cincinnati, 1999, p. 30).

Meaning of the Body

Mutual promotion of individuals in interpersonal sexuality is effected through the medium of the body. Gestures and bodily attitudes are a language that expresses the welcoming spirit. A caress is an attempt between two persons to reveal themselves to each other through their bodily reality. When I caress someone, I acknowledge his body and reveal his body to himself. Caressing is an act that communicates tenderness, sympathy, appreciation, support, love, through the body. This type of communication or dialogue makes sense only if it is born of love and mediates love.

The union between husband and wife is a communion of persons. "When they are united by conjugal covenant in such a way as to become one flesh, this union ought to take place 'in truth and love' and thus express the maturity proper to persons created in the image and likeness of God" (John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 8).

The Pope points out that every man and every woman fully realises himself or herself through the sincere gift of self. For spouses, the moment of conjugal union constitutes a very

particular expression of this self offering. That is the moment when, in the truth of their masculinity and femininity, the husband and the wife become a mutual gift to each other. The whole of married life is a gift; but this becomes most evident when spouses, in giving themselves to each other in love, bring about that encounter which makes them one flesh (cf. *Ibid.*, 12).

Sex between husband and wife is not to be looked down upon. There is no reason why anyone should consider it bad, indecent or merely tolerable. Persons who are happy and open to life are able to look at love and sex in marriage as God's precious gifts to humans. There have, of course, been neurotic reactions to sex by persons who emphasise the fear of sin and teach diffidence in the body and in sexuality.

The ancient Hebrews felt shame and embarrassment towards their genital sexuality; they considered it mean and reserved it to an entirely private zone. They considered the concrete experience of sexuality as contaminating. When someone had done the sexual act, he was considered unclean and had to purify himself in order to participate in divine worship.

In the primitive Christian community there were no prescriptions for ritual purification for religious worship. According to Jesus what really mattered was not ritual purity but the purity of heart: "happy are the pure of heart; they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). As the Apostle Paul teaches, "Everything is pure for those who are themselves pure" (Tit 1:5), including sexual union. The sexual act does not contaminate, provided it is done morally, with mastery over self, and not as an expression of brute passion. "Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean" (Acts 10:5).

From my experience in dealing with couples, I know that if the husband or the wife denies the marital rights to the

partner, it can create suspicion, resentment and disharmony in the family. Rather than demand or deny these rights, they should dialogue and plan together. One man said to me, "I approached my wife several times. Each time she said no. I do not know what is the problem between us!" A disappointed wife had this to say, "Nowadays he is not interested in me. I wonder if he has another!" One man said he had no way but to masturbate because his wife flatly refused and he needed to seek relief. He said he could not help it. Denial of marital rights to each other can lead to self-abuse and to infidelity. In such cases, both partners are responsible for the evil.

It is sinful to deny each other without adequate reason such as illness or indisposition on your side, immorality or drunkenness or violence on the side of your partner. What would be the law in normal conditions need not be applied in these altered conditions. The reason for saying no to the partner who proposes has to be made known to him or her.

See what St Paul says about this, "A man should fulfil his duty as a husband, and a woman should fulfil her duty as a wife, and each should satisfy the other's needs. A wife is not the master of her own body, but her husband is; in the same way a husband is not the master of his own body, but his wife is. Do not deny yourselves to each other, unless you first agree to do so for a while in order to spend your time in prayer; but then resume normal marital relations. In this way you will be kept from giving in to Satan's temptation because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor 7:3-5).

The Function of Sex

In the Word of God, sexuality is liberated from the cultural framework of purity-impurity and taken in its genuine sense. Sexual act is a human relationship and one of the deepest forms of interpersonal relationships. That is why it is entrusted

with the procreative function, to be fulfilled only in a monogamous marriage, that is, in a permanent and stable relationship of personal communion and fidelity.

Sexuality brings husband and wife closer to each other. Their sexual union brings their love to completion, for it is the most intimate expression of mutual love and the peak experience of intimacy. It works also as a medicine that heals little quarrels and grudges, and eases mutual rapport. When the marriage union takes place in the context of mutual love and respect of the spouses, and is a celebration of life in the Holy Spirit, it is really joyful and fulfilling. The husband and the wife — male and female — are made in the image and likeness of God. Their union, too, therefore has something godly about it.

In their book, *Two for Joy*, Tom and Lyn Scheuring affirm that there is nothing good in life that is apart from God's plan for us to grow in holiness. "Our physical relationship isn't outside of God's realm or outside of His plan. In the moment of sexual intercourse, when we are most completely joined in 'one flesh', the expression of total giving of ourselves to each other, we certainly go beyond the physical to the spiritual — totally 'touching' who we are."

The marriage vows demand total self-gift and irrevocable commitment to unity. A married couple is called to fidelity, not perfection; to unity, not individualism. Loraine and Leon Bent, a team couple for conducting enrichment programmes, write, "Sexual intimacy is a special form of unifying presence: a mysterious, lingering, enveloping, quivering delight, and a delicate devotion. It means carrying one's spouse, always and everywhere, in the warmest core of one's heart. Such communion is found most perfectly in the love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." According to them, orgasm is love's most powerful divine moment. For then "it

is sheer giving, utter generosity! It is the celebration of life in the Spirit. This is why sex is holy!"

Misuse of Sex

Sexual activity, unsupported by genuine love, is exploitation. In the same way, if there is no commitment to belong together, sexual intimacy is vile fornication. Without the free choice of the partners, it is mere rape; and without respect for one's own self-worth, it is an enslaving abuse. Marriage presupposes accepting one's spouse unconditionally and uncompromisingly. It means allowing the partner to be himself or herself without ever making him or her a mere object of one's gratification.

Physical oneness is neither an end in itself nor an isolated experience. It is part of a living communion. Gary Chapman says, "Do your hearts beat together spiritually? Are you encouraging each other in spiritual growth, or is one pulling gently but consistently in the opposite direction? Spiritual foundations are important. In fact, they are most important. Without the guidance of the Creator, we are unable to attain our potential as married creatures ... there is an interesting factor about sexual oneness. It can never be separated from emotional, spiritual, and social oneness. In fact, the problems that develop in the sexual aspect of marriage almost always have their root in one of these areas."

The Bulletin of the Ovulation Method Research and Reference Centre of Australia once carried a note pointing out that sex is an instinct that leads to an institution. The institution is marriage and the family. The note said, it is a tragedy that some people think that they can be better off as a result of separating the small instinct from the grand institution it was meant to serve. It is like trying to savour the key, but not using it to open the door that allows one's entrance into a home and a world of endless treasures.

Virginity is certainly appreciated, but it is not a command (cf. 1 Cor 7:25). It is a personal call and a gift from God, just as marriage, too, is a gift from God. Only that virginity which is practised for the Kingdom of God is justified (cf. Mt 19:11-12). Those who cannot conveniently practise celibacy should marry, for marriage is the gift God gives them. It is advisable for the unmarried and the widows to marry if they find that they cannot exercise genuine self-control, for "it is better to be married than to be burnt up" (1 Cor 7:9).

It is, of course, "a good thing for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). However, as the life of celibacy is not a vocation given to all (cf. 1 Cor 7:7; Mt 19: 10-12), St Paul does not recommend continence to married people. He rather invites them to make use of marriage: "The husband must give to his wife what she has a right to expect, and so too the wife to her husband" (1 Cor 7:3). Having one's own husband or wife is necessary for most people in order to avoid immorality. Paul, therefore, does not advocate permanent abstinence to couples (cf. 1 Cor 7:5).

Man and woman are made to reveal themselves to each other in a reciprocal gift. Their sexuality is a means not only of procreation but also of the realisation of the spouses in their mutual love. The pleasure that accompanies the sexual act is neither the primary value nor the final end of the act. Sexuality is willed and created by God. Yet, like any human activity, it can become a cause of sin if the order willed by God is upset when procreation is wilfully blocked and the act is no more than a selfish search for pleasure. To say the least, that is immature and irresponsible behaviour. The only right context for practising sexual union is in matrimony. Only there it is lawful, and from there it derives its nobility. Outside this context, every sexual act becomes a grave disorder. It is then not only indecent, but also immoral and sinful.

Sex and Salvation

Sacred Scripture indicates the deep meaning of sexuality in relation to the salvific event. Thus it is used as a symbol in describing the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people (cf. Hos 1-3; Jer 3:8-9; Ez 16 and 23, Is 50:1). The chosen people were encouraged to live their sexual experience so as to reflect the covenant. Conjugal sexuality was to be a symbol of how God lives in union with His people (cf. Mt 24:38; Lk 17:27; 14:20).

In the New Testament, the union of the spouses is called to symbolise the union of God in Christ with His people constituted into the Church. When Jesus was asked if there will be marital sexual experience in the future life, he recalled that in the eschatological covenant, total communion with God in love will be realised, making irrelevant every sexual symbolism. "For when the dead rise to life, they will be like the angels in heaven and will not marry" (Mk 12:25). Existence in future life will be completely different from present earthly life.

The Gospel suggests celibacy on earth as an apostolic service, as greater availability for the mission to build up the Kingdom (cf. Mt 19:12). St Paul says, "An unmarried man concerns himself with the Lord's work, because he is trying to please the Lord" (1 Cor 7:31). "The man who marries does well, but the one who does not marry does even better" (1 Cor 7:38). In other words, marriage is certainly good, and consecrated celibacy is better.

How should one live the marital sexual experience in the present life? We are in the process of a paschal transition: from living according to the flesh to living according to the spirit. The scope of this process is to lead every single person and every married couple to form in Christ "one body and

one spirit", as we say in Eucharistic Prayer III. St Paul has promised the Church in Corinth as a pure virgin in marriage to one man only, Christ himself (cf. 2 Cor 11:2). The spouses united together in one flesh should try to offer themselves to Christ as a little Church "pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection" (Eph 5:27).

This aim is not fully realisable in the present life. Rather than already being one in Christ, spouses are committed to redeem each other and to cooperate with the sacramental grace they have received from the Spirit of Christ. They have a spiritual ministry to fulfil to each other. They must live the sexual part of their union in charity, looking beyond the sexual experience itself to a greater good.

Sexual life enters into the religious sphere by acquiring a significance that transcends its material reality, by acquiring a new and higher sense. When it is transported above the bio-psychic order of nature into the symbolic order, it is considered sacred. Sexual reality, in addition to being lived with symbolism, appears to be even reduced to pure spiritual symbolism. The prophets speak of the nuptial relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Hos 2: 21; Is 49:18; Gen 5:7; Ez 5:13). St Paul speaks about the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23). The Song of Songs uses the nuptial symbol to express the intimate relationship between God and the individual persons: "Take me with you, and we'll run away; be my king and take me to your room. We will be happy together, drink deep, and lose ourselves in love" (1:4; cf. 1:9,13). The nuptial symbol expresses the value of the real content of spiritual love.

School of Virtue

Sexuality is something good, created by God, though it is disoriented and stained by sin. It was sin that made it shame-

ful (cf. Gen 3:7). One should not be enslaved by the sexual experience, nor seek it as a goal in itself. Every Christian has to rise above sexual experience to walk better towards the Kingdom of God. Yet, sexuality has to be welcomed realistically as a human and natural component of life and thankfully accepted as a God-given gift.

We learn from the Book of Genesis that God created human beings in His own image and likeness; He created them male and female. Therefore man and woman constitute autonomous values. They are not mutually complementary as though each one were incomplete and totally dependent on each other. Instead, there is reciprocity. They are called to offer themselves, as responsible and mature persons, in interpersonal relationship of service and self-gift. Yet, The relationship between man and woman does not exclude negative aspects. There is no perfect or permanent harmony between the potentialities of male and female.

Man and woman are the same in their loving union with Christ. As St Paul says, "So there is no difference... between man and woman; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:29). Man and woman are mutually dependent (cf. 1 Cor 11:11-12), and equal in dignity (cf. G.S. 29, 49). The two sexes are made for each other.

The consequences of sin are seen in the relationship between man and woman. According to the Genesis story, the woman induces the man to evil (Gen 3:6-12) while the man tries to dominate the woman (Gen 3:16). They also feel ashamed of themselves.

"So God created human beings, making them to be like Himself. He created them male and female, blessed them, and said: Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting

you in charge of the fish, the birds, and all the wild animals.” (Gen 1:27-28). This story underlines the difference between the sexes and their coresponsibility, especially in relation to their creativity: “Be fruitful and multiply”. While the male and the female of our race engage in creating new human beings, they are actually functioning as images of God the Creator.

When sexual life is lived according to the moral order and within a spiritual perspective, it becomes virtuous. For this purpose St Paul recommends marriage to the Christian (cf. 1 Cor 7:2). According to St John Chrisostom, there are two motives for which marriage has been introduced: so that we may keep ourselves chaste and so that we may become parents. Since concupiscence had entered the world, matrimony also entered with the scope of preventing disordered excesses. As St John Chrisostom points out, marital sexuality is lived in a virtuous manner only when peace and harmony prevail between the spouses in such a way that they love each other as Christ loves the Church. Thus married life becomes a training ground, a school of virtue, and the home becomes like a Church.

Whatever You Do to the Least

“Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.”

— *Kahlil Gibran*

A few years ago, the editor of *The Teenager* magazine requested me to evaluate the entries he received in an essay contest on Abortion, and to select the prize winning entries. For the first prize I selected an entry sent by a 13 year old girl called Kriti Riana Pereira. It was published in the February

1995 issue of the magazine. I am reproducing it here with the editor's permission:

"Abortion — the very word sends a shiver down my spine, having seen the picture *The Silent Scream* shown in our school. What a dreadful act of inhumanity! How can anyone think of destroying life in the embryo? Though it seems impossible, yet 'The Silent Holocaust' takes place at every moment in this darkened world, where life has lost its meaning. It is dreadful to think that a mother can destroy her own child!

What has the child done to experience the wrath of the mother even before seeing the light of day? The fundamental right of life is denied to that child — the right to live. Can a mother who has cruelly aborted her child live in peace and joy ever after?

Oh, the horror of abortion! My tears poured down profusely when this documentary film was shown. The little infant kicking desperately against the slippery bare walls of the mother's womb, struggling for life while she is subjected to the surgeon's knife by the hard-hearted cruel woman who bore her. The life of the babe ebbing piteously in the womb of her mother! The little hands clasped tight, the mouth wide open gasping for breath, the agonising cry of the unborn babe; yes, the silent scream in the silent holocaust! There is no one to come to her aid. The doctor is clipping off the tender limbs of the child one by one to earn money by destroying a precious life at the request of her mother. Will this wealth last?

A mother is described as loving, kind, tender! Where do all these virtues go when she submits herself to this hideous crime? Doesn't she feel for the child of her womb? Life is God's gift and no one has the right to take it away. The mother who destroys her child is worse than an animal for even an animal loves and protects her young ones.

I saw a bitch lately, who had littered a dead puppy. The bitch was restless when the pup was removed from her. She ran round the room whining in search of the pup. Only when the pup was placed near her did her restlessness cease. When I watched the love of the bitch for her pup I did recall with much feeling and emotion "The Silent Scream". It has stirred my whole being and I was overcome with grief at the inhumanity of men and women. Even the animals seem to be superior to human beings in their feelings. Is it not a shame?

Today's world has become materialistic. Money, wealth, power, pleasure is the order of the day. A child becomes a burden to the parents, especially a girl child! The sooner she is destroyed, the better it is! Why? Isn't a girl child too a replica of God? Very few think on these lines for they think that their ego is boosted when a boy is born into the family. Woe to those who think on these terms of prestige and honour and glory and destroy life!

I wonder at God's patience. He is never discouraged after seeing so much of cruelty in life and He still creates life, which in turn is aborted by the receiver. A child is a gift of love and joy even to a home where parents reject this love and destroy this love in abortion.

When all is said and done about abortion, I raise my heart and mind in thanking God for my dear Dad and Mom who have welcomed me to life, and enjoy life. I have two brothers but I am in the special care of my parents. Thank you dear Dad and Mom for your love for me."

Abortion is the deliberate killing of an absolutely innocent and absolutely defenceless human being. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me," says Jesus the Lord (Mt 25:40). In every sense, literally, the baby still in the womb is the least — voiceless,

defenceless, utterly helpless, totally at the mercy of the mother! What is done to such a person, Jesus considers done to himself.

The Sin Haunts the Sinner

For almost twenty-five years now, I have heard from numerous women the burden of guilt they carry even twenty or thirty years after they committed abortion. They know they have killed their own offspring, and no theories, no counselling, not even repeated sacramental absolution seem to console them. God, of course can forgive anything, even an unspeakable crime like abortion. But the sin of abortion haunts the sinner mentally, psychologically, affectively and spiritually. In the hope of making life enjoyable, they did away with their own babies, and the consequence is life-long unhappiness, insecurity, fear and guilt-feeling. Their conscience does not grant them truce. The voice of the Lord is loud and clear, "Let the children come to me and *do not stop them*, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Lk 18:16). In the book of Genesis God warns, "If anyone takes human life he will be punished" (Gen 9:5).

Lara, aged 27, declares herself a non-believer. I quote from a letter she wrote:

"I do not even want to hear about abortion and the pill on the day after. As a woman, I consider these things as an enormous step backward. I do not understand how one can feel 'evolved' or 'emancipated' in having power over the life and the death of a totally defenceless human being.

I do not believe that 'deliberate maternity' has anything to do with the feeling that one has the right to decide who should live and who should not. It is useless to keep turning around big words: by interrupting pregnancy one interrupts life. This is a fact, so much so that every single person present on earth

today is the outcome of a pregnancy which somebody has not interrupted.

Who gives me the right to deny life to a defenceless baby? Does a woman need this in order to feel free and in command of herself? What type of emancipation is this? Of course, it is the women who carry babies in their wombs. Yet, they do not conceive their babies by themselves, and therefore the babies are not their property, and much less, a part of their body. Personally to me, a new life that is coming seems to be something marvellous, harbinger of joy and love. By accepting the idea that I can dispose of it as I want, I shall not feel I have greater freedom.

There is so much talk of 'deliberate choice' and 'self-determination' which only lead to forms of behaviour that show individualism, egoism and total indifference towards the victims of this horrifying initiative" (*Famiglia Cristiana*, 21-28 May 2000, page 8).

The same issue of the magazine that carried the above letter contained another one, by Enza, who looked after a 5 year old boy called Luca for 14 months. Luca's parents were of extremely poor health and unable to look after their large family. As they were looking for somebody to whom they could entrust the child, Enza volunteered to take him. After 14 months when the boy was returned, Enza gave a letter to his parents, for Luca to read when he would be grown up. Here is the letter:

"Dearest Luca, my child, little darling, how much joy you have given me! You have been a breeze of joyful spring in my life, a ray of the sun. When I try to mentally relive the time you spent with us, so many beautiful things come to my mind. They are difficult to describe because they are about sentiments. Remember, my love, when in certain situations you said you were afraid? I explained to you that we are strong, that nothing

can frighten us. I remember how your eyes became bright when you discovered new things: the sea, the mountain covered with snow... How much joy you gave us from the time you entered our house! You have revolutionised our life with your sympathy and cheerfulness. Dearest Luca, we have chosen to accompany you through a stretch of your life, and we wanted to leave in you a trace of love, and you too have given us so much love! The void you leave is filled with joy in seeing you serene, together with your mom and dad who have always wanted you. Now it will be they who accompany you with love along your way in your life which we hope will always be happy."

This is just one example of how much love a child can give and receive even from those who have no blood relation at all. How much more must a child's parents welcome and love their own offspring!

Heed Their Cry

"The disaster that came to my people brought horror; loving mothers boiled their own children for food" (Lam 4:10). Conscientious people can hear the cry of the innocent victims rising from abortion clinics:

"My strength is gone,
gone like water spilt on the ground.
All my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like melted wax.
My throat is as dry as dust,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
You have left me for dead in the dust.
A gang of evil men is around me:
like a pack of dogs they close in on me;
they tear at my hands and feet.
All my bones can be seen" (Ps 22:14-17).

Let him or her who has a heart give heed to this cry!

A practising doctor from Bangalore has no doubt about abortion being discrimination against women. I quote from what she writes:

"I have been researching for some years on the Post Abortion Syndrome... Many women have been brainwashed to believe that it is their fundamental right to decide whether to kill or allow the little person to stay alive.

It is interesting to know that in England doctors who do abortions have asked that pain killers be given to the 'little one' in the womb as they did not want the baby to feel pain. But they don't mind killing him!

Abortion leaves a woman vulnerable to breast cancer, mental illness, alcoholism, marital breakdown, infertility, etc. Scientific documentation confirms this. Should the abortion fail as many do, the baby can be rendered defective or deformed. The man who is also responsible for the new life, i.e., the unborn baby's father, does suffer from emotional problems but in no way can the harm done the mother be matched. The dreadful, often lifelong, destruction to the mother or, even worse, a young girl who gets pregnant from a premarital experience proves that the harm done to women who have an abortion is undeniable" (Dr M. M. Mascarenhas, in *The Herald*, April 28-May 4, 2000).

The Church stands for life and "condemns as a grave offence against human dignity and justice all those activities of governments or other public authorities which attempt to limit in any way the freedom of couples in deciding about the number of children. Consequently any violence applied by such authorities in favour of contraception or, still worse, of sterilisation and procured abortion, must be altogether condemned and forcefully rejected. Likewise to be denounced

as gravely unjust are cases where, in international relations, economic help given for the advancement of peoples is made conditional on programmes of contraception, sterilisation and procured abortion" (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 30).

Have you had an abortion? Pope John Paul II has words of comfort for you:

"The wound in your heart may not have yet healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement, and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give His forgiveness and peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost, and you will be able to ask forgiveness from your child who is now living in the Lord" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 99).

Points to Ponder

1. Have you acquired sufficient knowledge of the social, psychological and religious implications of sexuality?
2. How will you answer those who contend saying sex is shameful, unspeakable and unholy?
3. Are you familiar with what the Bible and the Church teach about sexuality and sexual morality? If not, make it a point to get familiar with them at the earliest.
4. What do you think about abortion, the destruction of an unborn human life? Many arguments are advanced in favour of abortion. Do you think they are justified?

Sex and Sanctification



I know that many people would wonder at this title: what has sex to do with sanctification? Most people seem to think sex has more to do with the opposite of sanctification. Can real sex bring us closer to God? It is true that sexual crimes are plenty, but that is due to the misuse of a good gift. A good gift is to be used in a good way, and that is our consideration here.

According to St Thomas Aquinas, behaving in a virtuous manner is equal to acting according to reason (cf. *Summa The.* II-II, q 141, a.1). Regulated and controlled by sound reason, sexuality also is virtuous. Outside such rational direction sexuality expresses itself in sinful ways, in bizarre and hysterical manifestations, repulsive behaviour and shameful deeds.

Modern culture understands sexuality as a profound expression of the personal and communitarian sense. It

interprets the possible momentary suspension of consciousness in sexual orgasm as abandonment of the individuality of the "I" and the "you" for a unitary, conjugal "we". Modern ethico-cultural setting requires that chastity should be understood and lived, not as a chastising of pleasure, but primarily as an orientation of sexual life towards personal promotion in interpersonal love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his betrothed, "Our marriage will be an yes to God's earth. It will strengthen our courage to do and to accomplish something on earth."

All people, believers and non-believers, should be educated to live their own sexuality with dignity and benefit on a humanistic plane and within a spiritual sphere. Culturally speaking, sexuality is a force residing in the entire person and pushing the person towards maturity as adult. This maturity is a personal perfection that leads the person to open himself or herself in love to another person. It means reaching out in service that is respectful of the autonomy of the other, in delicately welcoming the intimacy of a member of the opposite sex, in helping everyone to live in the security of an interpersonal universe of understanding, acceptance and peace.

It is therefore necessary that couples be introduced to the theology of matrimony, to the sacredness of marriage and to the obligations of married state so that their married life may be enriched. Newly married couples will benefit enormously from this. They should be helped and supported in welcoming new life into the family and trained in the Christian upbringing of the children. Middle aged couples too need programmes to refresh their knowledge and to renew their family life.

Animated by Charity

Sexuality, transformed by the Paschal mystery of Christ, is capable of expressing itself animated by charity. At the root of Christian life is Baptism which introduces the person's entire

life, including the sexual aspect, into the paschal experience of dying and rising in Christ and with Christ. Genuine charity pervades the whole of human activity, including sexual. Through charity, one's sexual self is inclined to live in spousal union with God; is called to express itself according to the love of God and to be part of the mystical body of Christ. Charity inclines the sexual self to love God and the brethren with the same attitude that Christ Jesus had (cf. Phil 2:5). It prompts one to offer oneself as a gift to others even as the Lord sacrificed himself out of love for us. Jesus invokes on his disciples the same charitable love that unites himself and the Father: "Father, may they be one in us, just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21).

However, the Christian, pilgrim on earth, is not able to live charity in its pure expression. Christian charity is consonant with the fully human expression of personal sexuality, and is conditioned by the socio-cultural setting in which one lives. Thus charity can initially take different forms within the possibilities and abilities present in the sexual self. One has to learn how the affective integration with the opposite sex can be a way of loving God in one's brethren. Thus, for him or her sexuality becomes a sign and stimulus of charity (cf. L.G. 42).

Charity is diffused in personal sexuality as a charismatic experience. A charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit, meant for the salvation of humans, through the building up of the mystical body, the Church. In their interpersonal relationship, Christians — virgins as well as married — are to be inspired by their sense of participation in the love-agape diffused in the Church. Does not the liturgical assembly pray thus to the Father, "Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim Church on earth"?

Love of God in Christ does not neglect marital affectivity, but works in and through it for the Kingdom. On account of

their experience of charity, Christian couples nourish the hope of entering the freedom and the glory of the children of God (cf. Rom 8:21) through their matrimonial sexual life. Married life is a way to sanctity. As St Paul says, "Each one of us has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ has given... to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12).

Image and Likeness of God

The fact that sexual dynamism structures the human being according to a given formation of bio-psychic attitude has no bearing on the call to sanctity. As St Thomas Aquinas teaches, the degree of charity "does not depend on the condition of nature or on the capacity of natural virtues, but only on the will of the Holy Spirit Who distributes His gifts as He wants" (*Summa Theo.* II-II, q 24, a 3).

Personal sexuality shines upon and fills the whole human being, and it colours and flavours even the most elevated spiritual realities of man or woman. It has an extensive influence on the entire person. Both male and female humans are created in the image of God, says the Bible (cf. Gen 1:27).

According to St Thomas Aquinas, both in man and in woman there is the identical image of God on account of the principal reason for this image, i.e., the rational nature. However, on account of the secondary reason, the image of God found in man differs from that found in woman (cf. *Summa Theo.* I.q.93, a.4, ad 1).

According to Karl Barth, "The characteristic of the essence of God — which consists in being an *I* and a *Thou* — and the characteristic of the human being — which consists in being man and woman — correspond exactly.

According to the social analogy proposed by Mathias Sheeben, the created triad (man, woman, child) reveals in a visible and surprising manner the intimate fecundity of the communion of Persons in the Holy Trinity. Sexuality is a typical relational reality which is realised completely in a three-dimensional rhythm: father, mother, child.

The following consideration will help us to understand this better. The risen Christ is the "visible likeness of the invisible God" (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4). Human beings are created not so much as already the image of God but with the vocation to become image of God. In other words, the image of God in the human being is not a reality but a promise and a destination. With the coming of Christ, it has become possible for a human being to begin actuating his or her vocation and really becoming image of God. "All of us, then, reflect the glory of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same glory, coming from the Lord who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness in an ever greater degree of glory" (2 Cor 3:18).

If during earthly life humans are something of the image of God, one is such in the measure in which one participates in the Lord's life of charity. In short, what constitutes the true image of God is neither the fact that the entire person is sexually characterised nor the fact that sexuality is actualised in interpersonal relations in family. It is rather the fact that sexual life is transformed into a life of love in Christ.

According to St Alphonsus de Liguori, matrimony has two inborn and indispensable goals. They are the mutual self-bestowal and the indissoluble bond or the covenant. These two are constitutive elements that give meaning and legitimacy to the conjugal act, and therefore must be present in the marriage consent and in every conjugal act. The conjugal act has to be an expression of the intimate union of love; it should express and strengthen the indissoluble bond.

Beyond the Realm of Self

Sexual pleasure is more intense, more extended and more joyful when it is experienced in an awakening of love and spiritual sensibility towards the person who is loved. One has to assume spiritual forces as the integrating factor in sexual experience. It has been noted that orgasm is characterised by a considerable reduction or even complete loss of consciousness for a moment. This going out of oneself in orgasm, for getting into an erotic ecstasy, could be a reason why the very mystical ecstasy is at times described in terms of sexual experience. The ecstasy of sexual union is an excellent symbol to express the immersion and "disappearance" of the mystic's ego in the ocean of divine love.

The force that naturally rises in the psycho-physical self as sexual desire is a God-given urge, and has a God-given purpose. Marital love, including its sexual expressions, is a means of reaching into the limitless realm beyond oneself, where the human and the divine meet and the human ego transcends itself and comes in contact with the divine infinite.

According to Sidney Callahan, "Marital sexual passion shows forth the power and delight of God's love and joy. In sex we can worship the Lord with gladness. We are told that God delights in his creation and a sexual delight in one's own spouse, or for that matter the passionate love of one's own child, gives Christians an understanding of God's love and delight in each of us.

"Also sexual pleasure in marriage prefigures heaven's happiness and the heavenly marriage of the lamb in the Resurrection. So this is what a resurrected body joined with others may be like! In sexual passion we understand what it is to receive and enjoy blessed fulfillment. Such experiences, or epiphanies, rouse us out of our dull everyday torpor and inspire

us to understand what God's love and Christ's passion to save us is all about" (op. cit., 35-36).

The beginning and gift of a new life is realised in sexual love. Just as life is a gift of the loving God, so also He desires that new life — children — should come into being through the expression of the deepest and most intimate act of self-giving love between husband and wife. In God's plan, life and love go together and are inseparable.

There are persons who believe that two people are enough for the existence of love on earth, for example, the beautiful love in married life. If this love is not open to welcome another person, if the love of one for the other does not generate and cherish another person — a new and coming life — but excludes and eliminates him or her, then it is a selfish love, and it is an incomplete family. Deliberately and totally excluding progeny through any means natural or artificial, without clear and compelling reason, cannot certainly find any moral justification. True love is generative and creative, be at the divine level or at the human level. God is three because God is love. The love that seeks to limit itself only between two persons and is closed to a new person, is destined to be exhausted and to fail, because it is merely human, and bears no mark of the Holy Trinity. It is enough to look around to see any number of sad examples.

Something Beautiful to Follow

Some years ago I was visiting my friends, the Colombo family, in Milan, Italy. It was a well-to-do family. Luisella and Sabrina, the two children, were grown up and educated, and their parents, Alessandro and Fiorenza, were rather elderly and enlightened. Because of their behaviour and conversation, they seemed to me exemplary people. They were quite at ease with me and glad to tell me their home truths. While talking about

prayer and spiritual life, they shared with me something very personal and very beautiful. They plan together in advance when they will do the "matrimonial act". They are not carried away by brute passion or lust, but led by love.

Each time they come together for the marital act, they kneel down together and pray to the eternal and loving Father, giving thanks for one another, asking His blessing on their loving union, and surrendering their act to His holy will. They also told me, through their marital embrace they experience much peace, joy and communion of hearts; it enables them to deepen their God-experience and to develop their personalities. It is their way of growing together in the love of God and the love of each other. No wonder, they were an ideal couple.

This couple knew that for married couples the conjugal act is something sacred. They knew that their union should be prepared by prayer, and enveloped in God-experience and genuine love. They knew that before they become one in the flesh, they should become one in mind and spirit. Before their children were conceived in the womb of the mother, they were desired and conceived in the hearts of their parents. Theirs is an example for couples to follow.

The physical and mental characteristics that make a man a man and a woman a woman are called sexuality. Persons who are united in holy matrimony accomplish their conjugal sexual fulfilment through the union of their internal realm and external personalities. I have noticed how some elderly couples are so united and so much in harmony with each other that they acquire, as if by osmosis, a concordant style of thinking, talking and walking, and in some cases, even a similarity in appearance as well.

Sexual reality began with the creation of human beings: "So God created human beings, making them to be like Him-

self. He created them male and female" (Gen 1:27). God took a rib from Adam and made of it Eve, a suitable mate for Adam. The man looked at the woman and, full of love, said, "At last, here is one of my own kind — bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh. Woman is her name, because she was taken out of man" (Gen 2:23). The text of Genesis goes on, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united with his wife, and they become one" (Gen 2:24). Here begins man-woman relationship. Here is the foundation of conjugal life. The Lord Jesus himself restated this (cf. Mt 19:4-6; Mk 10:6-9). Therefore human sexuality cannot be compared to that of animals.

It is therefore necessary that married couples and those who are preparing for marriage keep in mind that their sexuality and generative faculty are part of God's plan and are gifts received from the loving Father in heaven. They should clearly understand that the process of married couples becoming one in the flesh is neither shameful nor unholy, nor is it mere animal instinct.

Proper and Improper Use of Sex

Sexual union of humans, known also as intercourse, copulation, marital embrace, coitus, etc., has an aspect of delight and enjoyment. It gives sensual pleasure. The mind, soul and body are joyfully involved in the loving, dedicated and responsible union of husband and wife. Then there is a relational aspect. Through coitus the spouses promote the flowering of the personality of each other and complement each other. It is a life-long commitment that involves physical and affective communion of the two persons. There is also a third aspect, the procreative one. It is cooperation with the Creator and participation in ongoing creation, ensuring the continuation of the human race and bringing forth citizens for the Kingdom of heaven, in obedience to God's command (cf. Gen 1:28).

God has given us the gift of sex to enable us to experience communion, to share love and trust and to grow more human. Without such love and communion, the sexual act becomes beastly, no more than mere lust. When people claim to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong without caring for God's law, they fail to recognise everything as God's gift. When they attribute everything to their own power and ability, they will not be able to enjoy even their own sexuality properly. Pride, selfishness, guilt and anxiety will then ruin this beautiful gift. A survey conducted among Indian couples recently showed that only 10 to 15 % of the people enjoy sexual union properly. The use of sex outside God's plan and intention can cause failure in many other areas also (cf. Rom 1:24-32).

Since it is God who endowed us with the sexual faculty, we have to use it according to His intention. Its proper use requires His grace and blessing that come through the sacrament of matrimony. Those who do not care for divine love in sexual relationship are led by mere brute passion, base animal instinct. When the tide of carnal desire ebbs out, their relationship ends. What is the difference between them and the animals who come together not to establish a communion of life but only to mate and part?

Sex is a channel of love, and love is holy, for God is love. Therefore sex is also a channel of sanctification. St John tells us, "God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in union with God and God lives in union with him" (1 Jn 4:16). Unfortunately, love is a word often misunderstood, misused and abused. Whatever we may call love, if it prevents us from living in union with God, it is definitely not genuine love. Any use of sex in such a context is also sinful, for God has given us this gift to enable us to live in love and in union with Him. Sanity is required in the use of sex, for only then can it fulfil its purpose, that is, to lead us to sanctity, to help us grow in holiness.

Points to Ponder

1. Marriage is a divine call, a vocation to holiness. What does this mean to you?
2. Does the way you live your marital relationship help you to become a better person and to come closer to God?
3. How do you, and how better can you, bear witness to Christ in your family life?
4. Do you agree that sex has a role to play in the sanctification of the couple?



Let Marriage Be Held in Honour



For Christians who, on account of their Baptism, have become temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19), marriage has a special beauty and meaning. See what Paul says about the loving union of man and woman in holy matrimony, "This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:32).

The mystery here is the divine plan of salvation for all in Christ (cf. Eph 3:3-6). One aspect of this mystery is the intimate and indissoluble relationship between Christ and the Church. Husbands and wives should also be united in a similar sacred bond. Matrimonial union reaches its excellence and perfection only when the husband and the wife love and cherish each other in the manner Christ and the Church love each other, that is, in perfect fidelity and total self-giving. And so we read the sublime teaching in the letter to the Hebrews,

"Marriage is to be honoured by all, and husbands and wives must be faithful to each other. God will judge those who are immoral and those who commit adultery" (Heb 13:4).

Jesus speaks about matrimonial alliance as a very high and definitive gift and commitment, similar to the faithfulness of God Himself: "Some Pharisees came to him and tried to trap him by asking, 'Does our law allow a man to divorce his wife for whatever reason he wishes?' Jesus answered, 'Haven't you read the scripture that says that in the beginning the Creator made people male and female? And God said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one. So they are no longer two, but one. Man must not separate, then, what God has joined together'" (Mt 19:3-6).

Stick to One Model

Henry Ford, the famous auto baron, was celebrating the golden jubilee of his wedding. Some of his friends asked him, "What is the secret of so many years of happy marriage?" He replied in the language of auto industry, "Stick to one model." Yes, that's right. In marriage, stick to one partner. Flirting and philandering destroys marriage. The unity of husband and wife is a contract made at the most important moment of the rite of marriage when the spouses express their consent saying, "I, N., take you, N., to be my wife/husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I shall love you and honour you all the days of my life."

These words of consent place before us the common good of the spouses and of the family, namely, love, fidelity, honour, the permanence of the matrimonial union until death. A gift such as this, as John Paul II observes, involves an obligation much more serious and profound than anything which might be purchased in any way and at any price.

The Pope points out: "The book of Genesis, in speaking of a man who leaves father and mother in order to cleave to his wife (cf. Gen 2:24) highlights the conscious and free choice which gives rise to marriage, making the son of a family a husband and the daughter of a family a wife" (*Letter to Families*, 8). As every human being is made in the image and likeness of God, there is also "a certain similarity between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God's children in truth and love" (G.S. 24).

It is important that we pray for married couples so that they will love their vocation and live their covenant with God faithfully even when the road becomes difficult, or the path becomes narrow, uphill and seemingly insuperable.

A Demanding Vocation

In his conversation with the Pharisees Jesus makes clear how the tender and spousal love that comes from God brings with it serious and radical demands. When the Pharisees appealed to Moses saying that he permitted the drawing up of a certificate of divorce, Jesus answered categorically, "From the beginning it was not so" (Mt 19:8). He recalls to them that it was the disposition of the Creator, Who made humans male and female, that "a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Therefore Jesus reaffirms. "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt 19:6). Moses allowed divorce only because of "your hardness of heart;" that was not the original law.

Referring to the sixth commandment, Christ proclaims, "You have heard that it was said: 'You shall not commit adultery'. But I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28). Pope John Paul II remarks that with regard to

the Decalogue and its purpose of defending the traditional solidity of marriage and the family these words represent a great step forward. He says, "Jesus goes to the very source of the sin of adultery, which dwells in the innermost heart of man and is revealed in a way of looking and thinking dominated by concupiscence. Through concupiscence man tends to treat as his own possession another human being, one who does not belong to him but to God. In speaking to his contemporaries, Christ is also speaking to men and women in every age and generation. He is speaking in particular to our own generation, living as it is in a society marked by consumerism and hedonism" (*Letter to Families*, 20).

Jesus the Lord is the eternal fidelity of God to His promises, and is the faithful witness of God's love. Thus he is the highest realisation of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves His people. In the same way Christian spouses have a vocation to participate truly in the irrevocable and indissoluble bond that binds Christ to the Church his bride whom he loves to the very end (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 11).

Total Self-Giving

Sexuality by means of which man and woman give themselves to each other through acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, says John Paul II, is by no means something purely biological. It concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realised in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving in which the whole person, including the dimension of perpetuity, is present (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 11).

The biblical picture of marriage, points out Gary Chapman, is the blending of two lives in the deepest possible way into a new unit that will both satisfy the individuals involved and serve the purpose of God in the highest possible manner. He points out that God Himself said to Adam, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). Chapman comments that this analysis was before the fall of man, and that this man already had the warm, personal friendship of God. Yet God said, "That is not enough!"

God's answer to man's need, according to Chapman, was to create woman, one who could be a suitable helper...with whom man could have a face-to-face relationship. Marriage was God's answer to a deep human need — union of life with another. This is a total union of two lives on the intellectual, social, spiritual, emotional, and physical levels.

In the words of Chapman, "This kind of union cannot come without a deep and enduring commitment that God intends to accompany marriage. Marriage is not a contract to make sexual relationship legal. It is not merely a social institution to provide for the care of children. It is not merely a psychological clinic where we gain the emotional support we need. It is not a means of gaining social status or economic security. The ultimate purpose of marriage is not even reached when it is a vehicle for love and companionship, as valuable as these are. The supreme purpose of marriage is the union of two individuals at the deepest possible level and in all areas, which in turn brings the greatest possible sense of fulfilment to the couple and at the same time serves best the purpose of God for their lives."

The unity of marriage by which one man or one woman has only one spouse, and the indissolubility of marriage by which the spouses honour their marriage bond till death without seeking divorce or dissolution of marriage are essential

characteristics of Christian marriage. Marriage is a grave commitment for all life and cannot be contracted as a passing diversion. Fidelity, unity and indissolubility make marriage truly honourable. When these characteristics are diligently guarded and protected, marriage becomes beautiful, a genuine path to holiness. It is through this path that God calls the majority of us to advance in perfection and to grow in sanctity.

Points to Ponder

1. Jesus not only attended the wedding feast at Cana but also provided excellent wine for the feast. Why did he do that?
2. Do you consider marriage as sacred as the other sacraments? Do you experience that marriage has something to do with your interior life? Can we speak of a mission of married life?
3. What is the purpose of marriage? Why did you marry?
4. What is your view of fidelity, unity and indissolubility? What is their value and what purpose do they serve?

Conclusion

Marriage is a sacred sign, a sacrament, of the ineffable union of Christ with the Church. Like that union, marriage also is hallowed by consecrated fertility, unblemished fidelity and unfailing stability. When married life is filled with the presence of Christ it becomes a life of grace and holiness. If love is the real basis of marriage, then God lives in the married couple, for "God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in union with God and God lives in union with him" (1 Jn 4:16). Holiness is nothing but this union. A family where love reigns supreme and experiences heaven on earth.

St Paul tells us that God did not call us to live in immorality but in holiness (cf. 1 Thes 4:7). At the same time He has called the vast majority of us to the married life. If so, then married life has to be a suitable path to holiness. In this book we have tried to see how.

Every human being normally and naturally belongs to a family, and every family is founded on marriage. Consequently marriage is of fundamental importance to the human race. The Christian family is the seed-ground of Christian virtues and Christian holiness.

Christian marriage is not a mere ceremony but a sanctifying reality that has to be cherished and lived all one's life. Authentic married life is itself a life of sanctity, of Christian perfection. God wants us to be holy, and has called us to live in holiness. Everyone should therefore know how to live with his or her spouse in a holy and honourable way (cf. 1 Thes 4:3-7). Our present book seeks to serve as a signpost on that way.

Marriage is not only the source and foundation of the human family and therefore of human society; it is also the nursery of Christian growth. It is God Himself who has joined the husband and the wife in chaste wedlock, as Jesus tells us (cf. Mt 19:6). Whatever God does is good and what God has joined together is a holy union. From the Book of Genesis we know that marriage is the only sacrament whose roots come from the earliest days of the human race, before the fall. The first marriage was celebrated in paradise when the spouses were innocent and in the state of grace. The Creator blessed that marriage in person, providing the man with a suitable companion (cf. Gen 2:21:24).

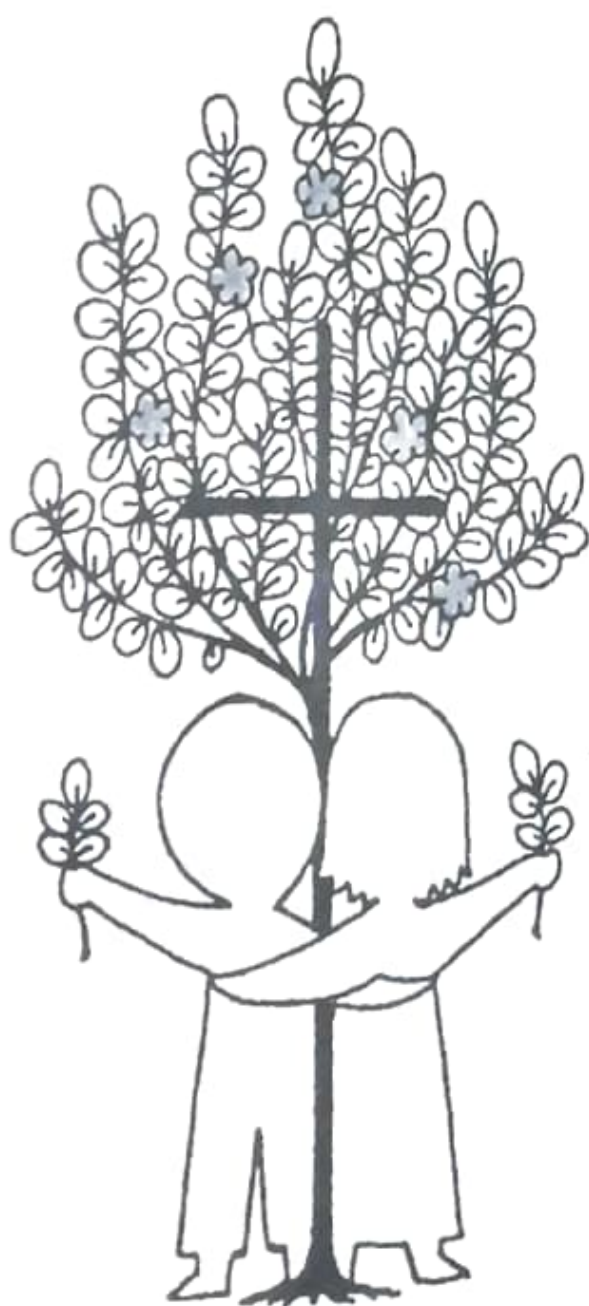
It is therefore evident that marriage is a divine vocation and essentially a path to holiness. A firm faith in this mystery will enable married couples to live in the presence of God and according to His holy will. From Him they will draw strength to face the many challenges and trials of married life and to grow in goodness and virtue even through crises, hardships and pain. The God who called the spouses to marriage is faithful, and will never deny them the graces they need. For marriage is indeed a call to holiness, to be innocent and pure as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people, and to shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, as St Paul would say (cf. Phil 2:15).

If the couples remain faithful to God and to each other, living up to their matrimonial vows, they will indeed shine and spread around the light of holiness.

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FAMILY LIFE

Way to Holiness

Many feel the need to place in relief that marriage and the family are the ambient where Christian life is lived and basic Christian virtues are cultivated, where the spouses practise love of God, of each other and of neighbour and thus grow in sanctity. George Kaitholil clearly shows that marriage is a genuine path to perfection. He establishes convincingly and delightfully that family life is a divine call, a fertile ground where the majority of the people work, suffer, love, serve, struggle and grow in holiness. The book is made lively by the sharing of his own experiences and those others have shared with him. His positive approach to sexuality as a means to sanctification is enlightening and joyful. This book will definitely help couples and would-be couples to understand and love their vocation and to live it happily.

Dr George Kaitholil, a priest in the Society of St Paul, born on 9 March 1948, was educated in India, Italy and Germany. He holds a doctorate in Spiritual Theology from the Gregorian University, Rome. He has travelled widely and given talks in many countries. He has authored more than six dozen books which have reached a sale of two and a half million copies. Some of them have been published in eight languages, both Indian and foreign. At present he is the General Editor of ST PAULS and BETTER YOURSELF BOOKS.



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